

HAPPINESS IS A BY-PRODUCT OF FUNCTION:
WILLIAM BURROUGHS AND THE AMERICAN PRAGMATIST TRADITION

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This dissertation examines the techniques and themes of William Burroughs by placing him in the American Pragmatist tradition. Chapter One presents a pragmatic critical approach to literature based on Richard Rorty and John Dewey, focusing on the primacy of narration over argumentation, redescription and dialectic, the importance of texts as experiences, the end-products of textual experiences, and the role of critic as guide to experience rather than judge. Chapter Two uses this pragmatic critical lens to focus on the writing techniques of William Burroughs as a part of the American Pragmatist tradition, with most of the focus on his controversial cut-up technique. Burroughs is a writer who upsets many of the traditional expectations of the literary writing community, just as Rorty challenges the conventions of the philosophical discourse community. Chapter Three places Burroughs within a liberal democratic tradition with respect to Rorty and John Stuart Mill. Burroughs is a champion of individual liberty; this chapter shows how Burroughs' works are meant to edify readers about the social, political, biological, and technological systems which work to control individuals and limit their liberties and understandings. The chapter also shows how Burroughs' works help liberate readers from all control systems, and examines the alternative societies he envisions which work to uphold, rather than subvert, the freedom of human beings. Chapter Four concludes by suggesting some of the implications of

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation presents a synthesis of the pragmatic techniques and ideas of Richard Rorty and William S. Burroughs. One works in philosophy and the other in literature, but they both seek to extend the practice of liberal values in our society. Their unusual writing styles, which are a consequence of their pragmatism, challenge readers through the use of redescription instead of argumentation. Richard Rorty calls this preference the primacy of literature over philosophy as a means of cultural discourse that leads to change.

The first time I read Richard Rorty, I realized he did not sound like other contemporary philosophers, although I was not sure why. In graduate school, (like most everyone else in our profession) I cut my intellectual teeth on French and German postmodernists, such as Derrida, Lacan, and Heidegger. Although reading them changed the way I thought about theory and language from a positivist, rationalist viewpoint to a more open-ended and historicist one, I never really enjoyed reading postmodern philosophy until I encountered Rorty in a graduate American Literature seminar. All those arcane European thinkers had left me cold; they didn't spark much critical inquiry on my part, no doubt a result of my own laborious pains in deciphering their often-elusive prose.

Rorty's prose, on the other hand, filled me with exciting possibilities. I was actually enjoying the process of wrestling with difficult passages. More importantly, I was better able to connect the theoretical framework to my own literary critiques. Like me, Rorty was not interested in lengthy, abstract discussions of first principles, nor did

his writing revolve around bizarre French puns. Instead, he told stories, asked difficult but engaging questions, and looked into the end results of his ideas. Most essentially, he offered more than just a different perspective; he made me aware that the interplay of a variety of perspectives was more fruitful than any single perspective, and that this shifting of narrative perspective was an acceptable strategy for writers.

When I began to consider American Literature in the context of Rorty's thought, I gained a greater understanding of both. I decided to focus my Rortyeian analysis on one of the American authors I found most challenging: William Burroughs. Research and study affirmed what I had already intuited, that both authors share similar attitudes towards narrative and language. Burroughs writes novels that are not really novels; they are one work broken up into pieces, connected by recurring themes, images, and characters. Burroughs puts into practice pragmatic ideas about the free play of narrative voices and the elusive, self-referential qualities of writing itself.

Rorty writes philosophy that is not really philosophy, because he generally ignores many of the discourse conventions of his field. Rorty does not seek a single, unifying perspective which would explain everything. He does not expound basic principles, engage in analysis of proofs, or even agree that logical argumentation is always the best mode of discourse for intellectuals. According to him, such methods represent a useful break from the traditions of philosophical discourse, but some of his critics think that he works outside of the boundaries for practitioners of their discipline.

I see both of these writers as coming out of the only native philosophical tradition we have, American Pragmatism. Pierce and James are the two earliest exponents of this

tradition, and Dewey, who is the pragmatist I look at most closely after Rorty, did even more during the twentieth century to bring pragmatic ideas into social and governmental policy. This tradition is not concerned with justifying the democratic, liberal principles of our country so much as it is involved with extending and improving democracy and the quality of life of the people. Putting Rorty and Burroughs together into the narrative framework of American Pragmatism helped me understand what each one is trying to do better than I could by trying to comprehend either singly. Both present a number of difficulties to the unsuspecting reader, because they break or suspend many of the rules of their discourse communities. Learning to work outside of these rules can be as valuable to the reader as it was useful to the writers.

CHAPTER 1

PRAGMATISM AND CRITICISM

This project, then, displays the results of my Richard Rorty-William Burroughs research. I'll begin in this chapter with my reading of Rorty's work, explaining his basic tools and concepts and analyzing what makes him valuable to American thought in general and American Literature in particular. To this I will add some thoughts from one of his primary influences, John Dewey, and use the combination of the two to show how pragmatism can be used to understand artistic works and promote better criticism. In the later chapters, I will use pragmatism to get a critical perspective on William Burroughs, showing how his writing can be better understood when given a pragmatic reading, largely because Burroughs had a pragmatist approach to his craft. His techniques are specifically geared towards pragmatic ends; indeed his whole outlook is pragmatic. Like Rorty, Burroughs is not interested in first principles but rather in the end-products of ideas.

Richard Rorty published *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* in 1989, and of all his books this work says the most about the relationship between philosophy, literature, and pragmatism. Although I want and need to use Rorty's terms in order to explain his concepts, I won't necessarily stick to his organizational framework or provide a point-by-point study of any of his books. Because my purposes are different from his, I will present pragmatism from a literary critic's viewpoint, emphasizing some points because of their close connection to my analysis of William Burroughs, while omitting other important ideas he has because they bear little direct relation to my project. Rorty's ideas

about foundations seem to be one of the most difficult sticking points for analytical thinkers, so let us begin there.

Rorty uses the term contingency to describe some of his ideas about people, culture, and language. The far-reaching implications of contingency are difficult to grasp at first because our language and culture are designed to allow us to avoid them. For starters, let us say that contingency means nothing is ever fixed, destined, or predetermined; everything is up for grabs. For example, a student of philosophy might begin by inquiring what definition Rorty has for human nature, but already she has run into a difficulty, due to inherent differences between her preferred methods of discourse and Rorty's. The question presupposes that Rorty thinks that there is some kind of essence which a definition of human nature could capture and describe. But Rorty does not want to write that way. He does, at times, offer descriptions which we may want to think of as definitions, but they are used pragmatically in certain contexts to achieve certain ends. They are not attempts to "define" in the sense of capturing some sort of essence. What makes Rorty slippery for foundationalists (people who look for an absolute metaphysical framework for their world-view) is his complete disinterest in making such definitions. Rorty describes himself as a nominalist and a historicist. This means that he finds such terms as "human nature," "destiny," "truth," etc., to mean only what a given person wants them to mean. People have no essence which they share with all others, which would define what it is to be human.

The absence of a concrete, distinct self forms a disturbing stumbling block for people who are used to thinking as though human beings have a stable, essential, core

identity which connects them to all others and provides a reliable means for judging human actions and ideas. Existentialism, which also states that people have no innate set of qualities, likewise proves unpalatable for many people because they fear a world in which people are not inextricably linked to each other by a binding set of traits which sets boundaries on their actions and identities. The idea of the core identity is an important and pervasive one in Western thought, and is the basis for many scientific, social, and popular practices. Most forms of psychoanalysis, for example, are predicated on the idea that there is a damaged “self” inside the person that the analyst must find and repair. In many conservative circles, drug addiction is not a physical, medical condition but a flaw of the personality, and this belief conveniently allows society to punish rather than attempt to medically cure the addict.

Rorty believes ideas like “human nature” are a holdover from the Enlightenment period, when religious explanations of the world and human behavior were going out of favor, so people began to devise secular, scientific, and rationalist terms to replace the spiritual ones they had used before. We still use phrases like “human nature” in order to convince ourselves and others that people have to behave in certain ways, and when people behave badly, they must therefore have transgressed against something important we all share. In other words, we have constructed ideal models of humanity in order to shape society because we believe there must be something universal within us that can provide grounds for judging human actions. This sense of a limiting force on human freedom, of “standards of decency,” helps calm our fears that the world is chaotic and gives us a sense of order and purpose.

If society were to follow Rorty and successfully dispense with the idea of the core identity, leaving people without the concept of a stable self to fall back upon, many would then refer to their community as a safe repository of identity, hopes, and dreams. By identifying themselves as members of a particular group, people can then adopt the qualities and purposes of that group, removing their fears that life may be meaningless, allowing them to ground their lives in something powerful, immutable, even (to them) eternal.

Rorty understands why people are comforted by such beliefs, but he thinks it is high time we moved past them. Collectively human beings are just as contingent as they are individually. No society (nor all of humanity) has any intrinsic nature or inescapable destiny. Although it may sound trivial to imagine that we are all products of time and chance, it is also liberating to realize that our horizons are not limited by some transcendent order or set of capacities called "human nature." We have the freedom to shape ourselves and our societies into anything we want them to be, given enough time, effort, and resources. Rorty calls this the "contingency of self" and "contingency of community."

Although Rorty chooses not to define humans, he does offer a historicist description of them as "centerless webs." Our identities are not single, coherent, unified things; they are a conglomeration of small details: who our parents were, the society we grew up in, the friendships we formed as children, our educational background, and other specific, historically-determined circumstances and experiences. Although there exists no essential "I," there is a provisional "I" which changes with time and context. What we

think of as human nature are either contingently-determined similarities between ourselves and others or just wishful thinking.

As we grow up, constructing our selves, we form what Rorty calls our "final vocabulary": "the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 73). As they are based on our contingent lives, final vocabularies are thus contingent as well, formed by discrete historical circumstances. The vocabulary is "final" because "those words are as far as [one] can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 73). However, most people, especially those Rorty calls "foundationalists," think of their final vocabularies as given, not created. They prefer so much to think of them in this way that they are easily shaken and hurt by anyone who might call the terms of their final vocabulary into question. Rorty has a name for those people who especially relish questioning final vocabularies: ironists. Rorty has a more detailed description of this term, one which will require that we understand how Rorty presents the contingency of language.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty deals with the linguistic and conceptual holdovers from the Enlightenment. As suggested by the title, his primary interest is in the image of the mind as a thing which reflects nature, showing us what is "out there," beyond ourselves and our language. Rorty's problem with this metaphor is that it has led Western thought to focus on "accuracy of representation," with all its attendant problems, questions, and hierarchies. Philosophers seem to have forgotten that the mirror of nature is just a metaphor, since they focus all their efforts and arguments on

which philosophical systems offer the greatest clarity in the mind's mirror. Rorty deconstructs the mirror by using Wittgenstein's anti-representationalism, Heidegger's historicism, and Dewey's social awareness, and suggests that we replace "the ideal of objective cognition" with an ideal of "aesthetic enhancement" (*Mirror* 13). In other words, we should drop the search for a better mirror, and work instead on "edification", the "project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking" (*Mirror* 360). Rorty concludes that there are no privileged discourses which can capture the "essence of man," because such an essence is a chimera. There are, however, a wide variety of alternative descriptions of ourselves and our world: poetic, philosophic, scientific, and religious, among others, and each of them has its uses, but none of them has an exact correlation to nature. Rorty later amplifies these ideas about the contingency of language in the first chapter of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: "Truth cannot be out there--cannot exist independently of the human mind--because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own--unaided by the describing activities of human beings--cannot" (5). When we think of language and nature as having a one-to-one relationship, the search for the perfect mirror becomes an obsession. This has led us to take for granted all the essentialist metaphors in our thought patterns. When we take metaphors seriously, as though they were literally true, we have severely limited our capacity for flexibility and adaptation in our thoughts and speech.

Now we may turn our attention to Rorty's three-part definition of an ironist. First, Rorty tells us that an ironist has "radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary

she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered” (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 73). The “radical and continuing doubts” indicate that being an ironist is a matter of perspective, of regarding one’s final vocabulary as an always-ongoing work in progress. The ironist therefore takes every element in her final vocabulary as provisional and subject to new alterations. Her source for these changes lies in other people’s texts, in the persuasive power of their language which causes her to adopt their modes of speech. “Radical” also implies that at least some of the changes ironists make are not trivial or cosmetic, but can lead to drastically different perspectives and outcomes. Being comfortable with these kinds of changes is one of the most challenging aspects of being an ironist. Few people, even those often considered to be unique artists or thinkers, can handle major alterations in the way they understand themselves and their world. Because of their unusual habit of taking all “essential” terms as provisional, ironists see nothing wrong with switching back and forth between competing perspectives, of never having irrevocable premises or unshakable principles. As a result, ironists also tend to receive harsh criticism and outright hostility from those who want to assert that one (and only one) viewpoint is “the right one.” Pragmatism as a whole, in fact, is frequently equated with slippery-slope relativism, a dark pit of amoral philosophy, out of which nothing good can emerge. Therefore any writer with an ironist attitude will frequently be subject to attack. Foundationalists make this sort of attack because they cannot “make sense” in an objectively realistic way out of a system of thought which does not depend upon first principles. Pragmatists point out that we don’t always need first principles in order to act.

We don't stop to consider the principles behind each and every action we perform on a daily basis, and if we did we would not get much done. We do hundreds of routine tasks not out of carefully reasoned principles, but rather because they get us the results we want.

Second, Rorty tells us that an ironist "realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts" that she has about final vocabularies (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 73). Ironists recognize the circular, limited nature of a given way of speaking, which is why they play vocabularies against each other. In doing so, they reveal the strengths and limitations of the perspectives they are using, and do so more effectively than they could using logic alone. The idea of the unbiased, logical interlocutor seems a bit ridiculous to the ironist, who believes that such a position is impossible for any person to attain. Pragmatists believe that logic and argumentation, although useful tools in many contexts, are not the only tools at our disposal and do not deserve privileged status. The ironist must become comfortable with doubts and uncertainties, because every adoptable position will have them.

Third and finally, Rorty describes the ironist's attitude towards language and reality: "insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 73). In other words, the ironist does not try to use a foundationalist approach to language by using the "mirror of nature" metaphor in order to claim that her way of speaking is more "right" or "real" than someone else's. She

understands that words are self-referential tools, and that words only refer to other words, not to some objectively certifiable “reality” beyond language.

Having said all this about the ironist, we may now get the impression that such a person is incapable of mounting a coherent opinion, much less sustaining a serious dialogue. When we look at what Rorty does with pragmatism, we can see that his awareness of the contingency of language and culture does not prevent him from adopting a liberal stance. Borrowing from Judith Shklar, Rorty describes himself as part of the liberal community, which believes that “cruelty is the worst thing we do.” The capacity for suffering, which we all share, allows us to identify even with those whom we might otherwise reject as alien to ourselves, and Rorty feels this identification can engender human solidarity. “But that solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with respect to pain and humiliation –the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us’” (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 192). Although Rorty’s liberal ideals and the democratic principles of the Enlightenment (such as Justice, Government by Consent, and Inalienable Human Rights) have no more foundation than do personal preferences about food, Rorty believes we can still support them: “The fundamental premise of the book is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance” (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 189). The principles involved hold

value for us not because they originate out of something timeless and unquestionable. The values we cherish in liberal intellectual circles (and Rorty makes it clear this is his primary intended audience) are worthwhile because they allow us to act in the present and to imagine a brighter future. Simply put, these ideals make our lives better, a “cash-value” in pragmatic terminology. Our society and its operating principles are just as contingent as our personal lives, but this realization is no cause for alarm. We do not need to justify liberal democracy, we need to make it work for us all, and improve it where we can. Rather than extending theory, we need to improve and extend the practice of liberal democracy.

This optimistic attitude lies behind Rorty’s latest work, *Achieving our Country*, wherein Rorty tells us that the best thing about community is our hope that it can be made better. He focuses on the ways in which artists of all kinds, especially writers, have the power to shape our country by suggesting directions we might want to take (or avoid!). Only by envisioning a better future does that future become possible. Therefore, when evaluating a writer’s work, we ought to ask ourselves what contribution to future vision this writer makes.

With this attitude towards art and writers, Rorty places himself alongside his pragmatic precursor, John Dewey. In order to understand pragmatic criticism, it will be useful for us to spend some time investigating how Dewey describes the complex relationships between experience, art, artists, critics, and society. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey says that an artist is one who is gifted in perceiving and processing experience, which is the “raw material” of art. The artist then uses this processed experience to

create works of art, which are vehicles of some sort of expression. Dewey is using “expression” here in a very particular way. He doesn’t just mean an utterance, description, or representation of emotion or idea: “instead of a description of an emotion in intellectual and symbolic terms, the artist ‘does the deed that breeds’ the emotion” (*Art as Experience* 67). In other words, art doesn’t just communicate emotion, it engenders it.

For this engendering to occur, those who view this vehicle of expression must perform the same task as the artist; they must perceive clearly, experience, and process that experience into meaningful terms, into some sort of expression. Thus, a work of art not just a thing in itself, it is also a process, an interaction between the art and audience. Art is both the object which inspires an expression and the expression itself; it is both medium and message. The receiver of a work of art, whether a member of the general public or a specially trained critic, goes through a process similar to that of the artist: processing the experience so as to make some of kind of sense of it. When we assimilate a work of art we make an expression of it to ourselves, even if that expression is only puzzlement or distaste. So, when we academicians and other professional appraisers criticize art, we should try to understand its expression and give others a sense of how well the artistic object serves as a vehicle of expression. We critics should ask ourselves, does the art as medium do a good job of delivering an artistic expression? We can break the art up, arbitrarily, in order to analyze parts, or we can view both its method and its impact as an indivisible whole. Often, our understanding is best served when we do both, rather than choosing one viewpoint over the other.

Beyond just the impact it has on individual viewers, what gives all art real-world,

political implications is its potential to affect perception on a large scale, to change the beliefs and attitudes of a whole culture. In other words, when we are open to the experience of art, we see not just a picture of a young woman coyly smiling or a poetic description of a jar placed on a hill in Tennessee; we see a whole new range of possibilities of being and expression of being that we never imagined before. We may be led to think about what our standards of beauty really are, or what kind of impact human technology has on the natural environment. Art can lead us to question assumptions and challenge the status quo, and a pragmatic thinker is always interested in these kinds of end-results of experience. Pragmatists are always looking for ways to tie ideas to specific practices, and therefore they are also looking for new ideas which may lead to better practices. The critic's job is to help us (other scholars and the general public) experience art in this way to the fullest extent possible. We can not only help people better understand art and appreciate its aesthetic qualities, we can help them understand its significance in the bigger cultural/political picture, and help them make connections between the issues brought up in art and issues in their own lives. To round out this abbreviated presentation of Dewey's complex description of art, let us add his outline of the common problems and difficulties in criticism, so that when we later combine Dewey and Rorty, we will have a workable model of pragmatic criticism's purposes and methods.

Too often, Dewey notes, criticism seeks not just better understanding of art, but an excuse for bestowing moral judgment: "criticism is thought of as if its business were not explication of the content of an object as to substance and form, but a process of

acquittal or condemnation on the basis of merits and demerits” (*Art as Experience* 299). The problem is not that critics exercise judgment, for Dewey tells us that “criticism is judgment, ideally as well as etymologically” (*Art as Experience* 298), rather that critics rush to make hasty judgment, and their single goal is to pronounce sentence upon art without trying to perceive the work clearly and come to a better understanding of it. This sort of peremptory judgment often stems from “subconscious self-distrust and a consequent appeal to authority for protection” (*Art as Experience* 299). Dewey states that negligent critics find it much easier to refer to authority than to do the hard and complicated work of perceiving and processing, and so will choose to ignore direct perception in favor of established norms and precedents, making the work fit the theory. Setting up universal standards of judgment based upon acknowledged masterpieces from the past only encourages imitation in art. Rorty seconds Dewey’s rejection of arbitrary judgment, saying “criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original” (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 80). Judging art by past standards, real or ideal, ignores one of the most commonplace observations about life: it constantly changes. Therefore, so should the art which expresses its visions. Art must be able “to cope with the emergence of new modes of life—of experiences that demand new modes of expression” (*Art as Experience* 303). Without recognition of new avenues of artistic creativity, criticism becomes conservative, reactionary, limited in understanding, and ultimately useless.ⁱ

In order to get useful criticism, we must begin with “control of the subject-matter of perception,” because “criticism is always determined by the quality of first-hand

perception” (*Art as Experience* 298). In order to see a work clearly, there are a number of pitfalls we must avoid. First, we need to be aware of the traditions, customs, and precedents applicable to the work in question. We should not be ruled by them, lest we fall into the trap of conservatism already mentioned, but we should not bury our heads and pretend that we know nothing about traditions, either. “There is no art in which there is only a single tradition. The critic who is not intimately aware of a variety of traditions is of necessity limited and his criticisms will be one-sided to the point of distortion” (*Art as Experience* 311). Seeing clearly is not just a matter of keeping an open mind, although that attitude is valuable. Seeing clearly also means knowing how a given work fits with past categories, so that we can better appreciate it within artistic and cultural contexts. This also heightens our awareness of how the work transcends traditional categories and breaks new ground. Knowledge of tradition could also lead to narrow categories of art, so we must balance our use of traditions with an avoidance of useless comparisons to other works and an avoidance of arbitrary standards. Facile, pointless comparisons and slavish adherence to past standards lead to stagnation; only that which fits easily into pre-existing categories and easily-applied critical formulae receives praise.

While taking the history of art or a particular genre into account, we should also look at the career history of the artist in question. The artist’s body of work, viewed as a whole, provides perspective on how that artist has developed: “In most cases, the discrimination of a critic has to be assisted by a knowledge of the development of an artist, as this is manifested in the succession of his works. Only rarely can an artist be criticized by a single specimen of his activity” (*Art as Experience* 312). Not only are

some works better or more accessible than others by the same artist, but trends and themes which appear only briefly at one point may burst into full prominence later in the artist's career. As critics, we will have a broader view and greater depth of understanding if we follow artists through each stage of development. The point Dewey makes is not that art history should determine our judgments, but rather that we the critics need to have breadth of experience and depth of understanding. If we have only read one novel or seen one painting, our views of the works of other novelists and painters will most likely be shallow and immature. We critics should think of ourselves not as judges, but as experienced interpreters of artistic expression. The wider our range of experiences, the better our chances of understanding the implications of a given body of work.

So, if we are ready to take into account art history and career history when appropriate to gaining depth of understanding, and we avoid the pitfalls of misleading critical approaches, we should have the necessary conditions for clear perception of our subject-matter. What we must do now is critique it. Dewey, who is more interested in discussing the nuts and bolts of criticism than Rorty, tells us that criticism consists of both analysis (breaking the subject-matter down into parts) and synthesis (creating unity and thematizing), saying "judgments have a common form because they all have certain functions to perform. These functions are discrimination and unification. Judgment has to evoke a clearer consciousness of constituent parts and to discover how consistently these parts are related to form a whole" (*Art as Experience* 310).

Stating the uses of analysis still begs the question of how we shall perform our analysis, leaving us wondering *which* parts we shall pick out to exemplify some

synthesized theme. Dewey believes critics must act out of "a consuming informed interest," which means that we use our best judgment, based on our own idiosyncratic final vocabularies, guided by both our love of art and our knowledge of relevant artistic traditions. A critic with no involvement in his subject-matter will perform cold, mechanical analysis with little sensitivity to the emotional impact the work might offer. A critic consumed wholly by personal biases and preferences, with no objectivity or basis of reference, may miss important clues which could have led to a more meaningful analysis. Using both emotions and intellect to weave a critical pattern that provides access to the art in question is the challenge of analysis which Dewey calls "a test of the mind of the critic" (*Art as Experience* 310). The test is difficult because there are no sure, immutable principles by which we can operate. By recognizing that all our critical choices are arbitrary, including which works we analyze as well as how we choose to break up works into parts, we extend the possibilities for enlarging our understanding of art and avoid wasting time arguing about limitations and rules.

Synthesis balances out the critical scales of judgment by unifying what analysis has broken down, for "without a unifying point of view, based on the objective form of a work of art, criticism ends in enumeration of details" (*Art as Experience* 314).

Ultimately, a critical project succeeds only when its audience is given something, some perspective which offers a richer, more varied, distinct understanding of the art in question. The critic needs to provide a structured, unified narrative of the artistic experience, based on "some strain or strand that is actually there, and bring it forth with such clearness that the reader has a new clue and guide to his own experience" (*Art as*

Experience 314). The unifying theme offered by the critic should not be a conglomeration of glittering generalities, vague and unsupported. The idea is to use synthesis to highlight specific features in the text which can then be used to illustrate the critic's synthesized theme. Although pragmatists acknowledge that truth is created rather than found, critics should not speak for the artist in ways that mislead readers by manufacturing that for which even they cannot find evidence. Rather, critics should offer a narrative which blends sensibly with that of the artist, to be in a dialogue with her, and to try to weave a narrative around objectively discernable traits in her actual text.

If we avoid the pitfalls of shallow criticism and we analyze and synthesize skillfully, we should be able to construct a useful narrative. I mean "useful" in two ways. First, there is the end-product of the artistic experience itself, meaning the sort of artistic experience we are led to have by the artist. When we critics remain receptive and sensitive to the end-product of a work, we are able to put our entire process of synthesis and analysis into a meaningful context. Rorty calls our attention to the wide variety of possible ends, saying "Different writers want to do different things. Proust wanted autonomy and beauty; Nietzsche and Heidegger wanted autonomy and sublimity; Nabokov wanted beauty and self-preservation; Orwell wanted to be of use to people who were suffering. They all succeeded. Each of them was brilliantly, equally, successful" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 170). I believe that Rorty and Dewey agree that critical theory too often leads critics to try to classify all art in the same sorts of categories, rather than recognizing how different the goals of artists can be. In his own essays on criticism, Burroughs concurs with Rorty and Dewey, saying "Certainly no one

can be justly condemned for not doing what he does not intend to do" (*The Adding Machine* 192). Focusing on the end results does not mean that we are searching for the single, true, and only legitimate end to every experience. On the contrary, the richer the work, the greater the number of possible end results: "the value of experience is not only in the ideals it reveals, but in its power to disclose many ideals, a power more germinal and significant than any revealed ideal, since it includes them in its stride, shatters and remakes them" (Dewey 322). Good critical theory allows and encourages critics to help discover as many of these possible ideals as we are able.

The second way in which our critical narratives can be useful is to work so that others have richer experiences of art. "The function of criticism is the reeducation of perception of works of art," Dewey tells us, reminding us that our primary goal should be to serve as guides along the path of experience. We cannot and should not try to experience art for others, giving them only a summary of details, nor should we substitute our own work in place of the artist's by intruding prejudiced theories upon our readers. Instead, we ought to highlight the qualities that make each artist unique, constructing narratives which will allow others to experience those qualities without the intrusion of arbitrary judgment.

Sadly, some critics have relished their power to proclaim an artist's work as "immoral" or "trash", either because they failed to understand the vision the artist was trying to present or because it offended their sensibilities. We could easily present a long list of works now acknowledged as classics that were censored because they violated contemporary standards of morality. Dewey believes that art should expect resistance

from those who uphold the status quo, “because art is wholly innocent of ideas derived from praise and blame, it is looked upon with the eye of suspicion by the guardians of custom” (*Art as Experience* 349). We critics ought to take care, therefore, that we not allow ourselves to become such reactionary guardians by allowing art at least the possibility of challenging and perhaps even changing our own final vocabularies. In other words, we need to be ironists, searching for new modes of expression. Pragmatism suggests that art, however controversial, is far more valuable to society than those who would stifle it, and that truly revolutionary art probably will have to go through a period of rejection before the vision it presents can be understood by intellectuals and the public: “Hence it is that art is more moral than moralities. For the latter either are, or tend to become, consecrations of the status quo, reflections of custom, reinforcements of the established order” (*Art as Experience* 368). The more a work of art transcends and transforms cultural assumptions, the greater its actual value to the society it challenges.

Using an ironist mindset, critics can help artists transform society by helping others apprehend the impact of art. Rorty believes that “the critic is now expected to facilitate moral reflection by suggesting revisions in the canon of moral exemplars and advisors” (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 82). By calling our attention to ignored artists, the critic assists in both personal reflection and public discourse, helping us see ways in which we may wish to revise our sense of what we want to be like, individually or collectively.

Rorty's favorite tool for assessing the utility of various vocabularies is redescription, which means taking a vocabulary and putting it in your own terms, taking

someone else's description and casting it in a different perspective. If we are to be ironist-critics ourselves, we should become familiar with the reasons Rorty has for preferring redescription over analytic argumentation: "The ironist thinks of logic as ancillary to dialectic" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 78). Rorty finds argument limiting; it represents many of the assumptions and practices of the current trends in intellectual discourse that Rorty wants to replace.

Argument requires premises and foundations, and it tends to presuppose that there is one right answer to any given question. If we use two or more vocabularies at the same time in our redescription, we are engaged in dialectic: "the attempt to play off vocabularies against one another" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 78).

Argumentation is the philosophical mode of discourse, based on the mirror model of thought, while dialectic functions as the literary mode of discourse: "The ironist's preferred form of argument is dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition. Her method is redescription rather than inference" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 78). We can see redescription throughout Rorty's books and articles, where he gives a vast array of prominent thinkers what he calls (borrowing from Bloom) "a strong misreading." This means making their thoughts serve as a departure point for his own, discovering advantages and weaknesses in their perspectives and your own simultaneously. If we were to look at a writer as an ironist, we should be able to see her in a constant search for additions to her final vocabulary, playing various descriptions off of each other: "take the writings of all the people with poetic gifts, all the original minds who had a talent for redescription . . . as grist to be put

through the same dialectical mill" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 76). This interplay of perspectives is dialectical in the Hegelian sense; after using one vocabulary as a thesis and another as antithesis, one should then arrive at a change in one's own final vocabulary that serves as synthesis. Furthermore, if one is a writer, the obtained synthesis could be utilized in turn by others who want to adopt this new vocabulary: "Ironists specialize in redescribing ranges of objects or events in partially neologistic jargon, in hope of inciting people to adopt and extend that jargon" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 78). Authors who are able to present their own, idiosyncratic final vocabularies in ways that suit the needs of their times or appear especially exciting to particular kinds of people influence how their readers think and speak and edify their audience.

Now we may turn our attention to the ways in which Richard Rorty and William Burroughs share an interest in literary edification. These two writers may rightly be called iconoclasts—both of them enjoy smashing the idols of assumptions and expectations in their respective fields. Rorty steadfastly refuses to justify his preference for liberal human values, a strange reluctance on the part of a philosopher. Literary criticsⁱⁱ have long found William Burroughs' novels equally confusing, often labeling them as either obscene or sheer nonsense.

Both writers' peculiarities stem from their own convictions rather than mere whim or the desire to be eccentric. They have interesting points to make, and they have found the limits imposed by dogmatic rules of their trades to be confining when they attempt to express their ideas, and so have gone beyond the boundaries of what was

previously assumed to be “natural” to their work.

Each can shed light on the other. Using Rorty’s ideas about the power of literature to expand our moral horizons, we can better understand what Burroughs has achieved: the novel pushed beyond its breaking point. Burroughs’ books are designed for dialectic, that pragmatic play of vocabularies, and he edifies the reader about the process of consciously building and revising final vocabularies. Burroughs sacrifices everything for his dialectic, literary elements other writers cannot do without, like plot continuity, stable characters, narrative exposition. He puts out a block of text which illustrates one point of view only to shift, without warning, into another radically different viewpoint, showing us how one sounds when juxtaposed with the other. Burroughs puts his pragmatic outlook into his writing, and in doing so has helped spread pragmatic thinking, although the term has rarely been applied to him. Allen Ginsberg described him as “one of the immortals; he’s had an enormous effect on succeeding generations of writers directly, and indirectly through my work and Kerouac’s work in terms of his ideas, his ideologies, his Yankee pragmatic spiritual investigations” (Ginsberg qtd. in Burroughs and Bockris 19). As a technical innovator, Burroughs has influenced both general readers and other artists, notably David Bowie, Kathy Acker, and The Talking Heads. His pragmatism covers virtually all of Rorty’s major themes, including contingency of self: “Human nature is another figment of the imagination” (*From the Bunker* 10); contingency of language: “All generalities are meaningless. You’ve got to pin it down to a specific person doing a specific thing at a specific time and space” (*From the Bunker* 10); and contingency of culture: “The past is largely a fabrication by the living. And

history is simply a bundle of fabrications” (*From the Bunker* 18). Burroughs’ emphasis on the primacy of experience of all kinds, internal and external, and the importance of investigating the end-results of ideas is similar to the views of James and Dewey.

Even William Burroughs’ rhetorical style sounds distinctly pragmatic:

“definitions are usually not necessary and frequently confusing. We do not need to define electricity to arrive at any formulation as to what electricity essentially is, to know how electricity operates and to use it effectively. I don’t have to define something in order to use it or describe its properties” (*The Adding Machine* 93). Burroughs frequently eschews definitions and applies this kind of cash-value thinking in his works, asking about consequences and outcomes rather than first principles and general formulations. His pragmatism has a strong linguistic component, like Rorty’s, and Burroughs is wary of terms like “Truth” that are highly dependent upon one’s own contingent final vocabulary: “Take an abstract word like ‘truth.’ You can’t see it, you can’t touch it. Everyone who uses the word has a different definition. Some are referring to religious truth, others to scientific truth, magical truth, pragmatic truth, some to a private lunacy. Everyone is talking at cross purposes” (*The Adding Machine* 101). Rather than worrying over definitions of ambiguous terms, Burroughs prefers to develop specific, context-sensitive solutions to problems. In the second chapter, I will discuss the techniques Burroughs uses to put into practice this pragmatic philosophy.

ⁱ I bring this issue of moral judgment to the reader's attention not only because Dewey explains the kind of criticism I want to avoid, but also because negative criticisms of Burroughs' reputed "immorality" have formed the bulk of critical (and legal) objections against him in the past. See Jennie Skerl's and Robin Lydenberg's excellent collection of examples in *William Burroughs at the Front: Critical Reception 1959-1989*. Among the best representatives of early morality-based opinions of Burroughs can be found in the *Times Literary Supplement* review entitled simply "Ugh..." and the letters it inspired.

ⁱⁱ For other examples of critical confusion, again consult Skerl and Lydenberg's collection, particularly the article by David Lodge, "Objections to William Burroughs."

CHAPTER 2

WILLIAM BURROUGHS AS PRAGMATIC WRITER AND THINKER

I use Rorty and Dewey in the first chapter to synthesize a pragmatic approach to literature, for Rorty's part focusing on ironist thinking, redescription, final vocabularies, and dialectic. I also extract some of Dewey's more specific methods for approaching and understanding art, such as analysis/synthesis techniques and the desirability of using criticism to increase the public's understanding of art, rather than judging it according to past standards. I begin my examination of the work of William Burroughs with an analysis of his methods, techniques and ideas which bear a distinctly pragmatic stamp. I analyze four pragmatic techniques: cut-ups, routines, literalization of metaphor, and vocabulary shift.

It is especially important to focus on Burroughs' techniques, as these have been widely misunderstood by critics and much of the general public, which mistake in turn has led to misapplied accusations of obscenity, immorality, and artlessness in his works. In later chapters, I will show more of the goals of his writing which will lead us to an understanding of the bigger picture, or synthesis, of his work as a pragmatic, ironist, and liberal thinker. I ask the reader's forbearance if this arrangement seems rather arbitrary, for it is. When dealing with a writer like Burroughs, who numbers among his goals the desire to move beyond hierarchical thinking, it is difficult not to write (as he does) in a somewhat circular, episodic fashion. So, rather than thinking of this text as an argumentative structure which relies on a specific order, I ask that you consider it more in the Rortyeen fashion as a narrative which tries to describe the works of Rorty, Dewey,

and Burroughs in such a way as to help us understand them better. Let us now examine the techniques which have helped make William Burroughs such an original and controversial artist.

The cut-up or fold-in technique is probably Burroughs' most distinctive one, although he credits his close friend and collaborator, the painter Brion Gysin, with the original discovery. Gysin, who in the 30's had been connected to the Dadaist movement in Paris, had already been using collage techniques in his paintings for many years when he accidentally discovered a way to do a collage with words. While slicing up pictures and using a newspaper underneath to protect his table from the knife, Gysin discovered that the sliced-up newspaper lines could be combined to form new texts. He immediately realized that this opened up new techniques for writers, based on what was already common practice among graphic artists. Saying that writing is fifty years behind painting, he shared this discovery with Burroughs, who began in characteristic style to intentionally investigate its possibilities. Burroughs hoped that "the extension of cut-up techniques will lead to more precise verbal experiments closing this gap and [give] a whole new dimension to writing" (*The Job* 27).

Burroughs immediately put this new experiment to use, publishing the cut-up collaboration *Minutes to Go* in 1960, and continuing to utilize cut-ups extensively in his Nova Trilogy (*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, *Nova Express*), and in *The Wild Boys*, *Port of Saints*, and *Exterminator!*. Burroughs investigated the use of cut-ups in other media as well, beginning with tape recorder experiments in collaboration with close companion Ian Somerville in the early and mid-1960's:

There are all sorts of things you can do on a tape recorder that cannot possibly be indicated on a printed page. The concept of simultaneity cannot be indicated on a printed page, except very crudely through the use of columns and even so the reader must follow one column down. We're used to reading from left to right and then back, and this conditioning is not easy to break down. (*The Job* 29)

The tape-recorder collaborations helped Burroughs develop his ideas about verbal programming. By recording passages and phrases; then re-recording back over them at random places, he used tape recorders to show how cut-ups could work audibly as well as visibly. Just as mass printing could be used to program millions of readers, the technology of mass broadcasting suggested to him ways in which audible cut-ups could be used to influence crowds of people in real-life situations: "go see some interesting results when several hundred tape recorders turn up at a political rally or a freedom march suppose you record the ugliest snarling southern law men several hundred tape recorders spitting it back and forth and chewing it around like a cow with the aftosa you now have a sound that could make any neighborhood unattractive" (*The Ticket That Exploded* 209-210). These tape experiments helped Burroughs develop his understanding of the relationship between language and technology, and for the rest of his career this understanding is presented in his novels and interviews.

In the mid-60's Burroughs worked on film projects with Anthony Balch, a British filmmaker who was interested in applying the cut-up technique to cinema (*Gentleman Junky* 115). Out of this collaboration came several short films, *The Cut-Ups*, *Bill & Tony*,

and *Towers Open Fire*, the last of which can be seen in excerpts in the commercially available *Commissioner of Sewers* (Mystic Fire Video). The impact of these multi-media works can be seen in all of Burroughs' subsequent books, in which he describes various possible uses for tape recorders and films for both controlling an unwitting populace or for freeing oneself from word and image conditioning. These same tools of Control (all those forces which seek to reduce human independence), i.e. tapes and films, when used correctly to subvert Control's commands become weapons which can destroy Control systems and their agents (government, police, or any representative of a controlling authority). Metaphorically, the linear progression of film and its ability to captivate the imaginations of viewers becomes the Reality Film. This film has been pre-recorded so that those endings desired by Control will come to pass. Only by destroying the scripts and disrupting the Reality Film can those freedom partisans that Burroughs champions hope to prevent Nova (the destruction of Earth via nuclear holocaust). Burroughs uses this metaphor throughout the rest of his writing, showing the reader many techniques for disrupting Control's Reality Film, and gives readers examples of his characters succeeding in such disruptions:

Kim shoots a hole in the sky. Blackness pours out and darkens the earth. In the last rays of a painted sun, a Johnson holds up a barbed-wire fence for others to slip through. The fence has snagged the skyline. . . a great black rent. Screaming crowds point to the torn sky.

“OFF THE TRACK! OFF THE TRACK!”

“FIX IT!” the director bellows. . . .

“What with, a Band-Aid and chewing gum? Rip in the Master Film. . . .Fix it yourself, Boss Man.”

“ABANDON SHIP, GOD DAMN IT. . . .EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF!”

Kim, one of Burroughs’ fictional alter-egos, is showing everyone the constructed nature of our reality, much to the horror of the Director, a master-manipulator who uses technology and language to convince us all that the official “reality” of Control is all that there is or ever could be. Reality is the con game and we (ordinary people) are the marks. Once someone like Kim succeeds in disrupting the Reality Film (a process Burroughs has also called “wising up the marks”), it becomes almost impossible for Control to re-assert authority, for Control’s hold depends upon our passive acquiescence.

By the late 1970’s Burroughs relaxed his focus on this cut-up technique (although he never abandoned it) and made a shift back towards more standard narratives. He felt he had learned a great deal from his cut-up period, but seem realized that he had depended a bit too heavily on it in some of his works: "I would go so far with any given experiment and then come back; that is, I am coming back now to write purely conventional straightforward narrative. But applying what I have learned from the cut-up and the other techniques to the problem of conventional writing" (*The Job* 55). This application of cut-up technique is evident in his second trilogy (*Cities of the Red Night*, *The Place of Dead Roads*, *The Western Lands*). Jennie Skerl points out that Burroughs’ return to narrative “does not mean a return to conventional forms of fiction, however. His works remain fragmentary in structure because he wishes to explore the power to

create stories rather than to tell particular stories” (92). Although cut-ups occur less frequently within the text, the narrative is cut into pieces and arranged in a non-linear fashion. For instance, *The Place of Dead Roads* begins with the death of the protagonist Kim Carsons, then goes into the story of who Kim is (was) and what he does (did)ⁱ to disrupt the Reality Film. Like most of his works, these books are fragmentary because their non-linear storylines are elusive and their endings are ambiguous, so that the trilogy as a whole can be viewed as a cut-up. In these later works, narrative sections often read like cut-ups, while cut-up sections blend smoothly with narrative. For example, here is a section of narrative which uses random elements to produce the juxtaposition-feeling of a cut-up:

The evening start shines clear and green . . . “Fair as a start, when only one / Is shining in the sky.” That’s Wordsworth, Kim remembers. It is raining in the Jemez Mountains.

“It is raining, Anita Huffington.” Last words of General Grant, spoken to his nurse, circuits in his brain flickering out like lightning in gray clouds.

Kim leaned back against stone still warm from the sun. A cool wind touched his face with the smell of rain.

Pottery shards . . . arrowheads . . . a crib . . . a rattle . . . a blue spoon . . . a slingshot, the rubber rotted through. . . rusting fishhooks . . . tools . . . you can see there was a cabin here once. . . (*Place of Dead Roads* 10-11)

From earlier works like *Nova Express* we can see how Burroughs uses dashes and ellipses to indicate the splice-marks in his cut-ups, rather like the cuts and splices in a film. Although the ellipses makes this excerpt look like a cut-up, it is actually a narrative passage which uses the style of cut-ups to depict the free associations of Kim's mind as he rests and contemplates his surroundings. In such later works as this, Burroughs found ways to achieve the effects of cut-ups while actually using them only sparingly. This brings us to some critical issues that must be dealt with. The cut-up technique has caused more controversy about Burroughs amongst writers and critics than any other. When Burroughs attended an international writers conference in Edinburgh in the 60's, he was subject to virulent attack by some of the panelists, not so much because of the so-called "obscene" elements of his work, but for his extensive use of cut-ups. One superficial objection to Burroughs' use of other people's material is that it is tantamount to plagiarismⁱⁱ. Many of the early literary reviewers of Burroughs have found no value in cut-ups whatsoever. Such people generally claim that his cut-ups are just a gimmick and have no literary value: "But how authentic is the "cut-up method," and how unique are its effects? 'You can cut the truth out of any written or spoken words,' Burroughs claims. The fact remains that in the first part of this work, which is by far the most effective, the cut-up method is used cannily and sparingly" (Hassan 57-58); "The cut-up method, by which the writer selects from random collocations of ready-made units of discourse, seems a lazy shortcut, a way of evading the difficult and demanding task of reducing to order the personally felt experience of disorder" (McCluhan 82). These reactions should not be surprising; Burroughs himself sees cut-ups as a challenge to much of the

traditional theory and practice of literature. For him, the outcry over cutups is primarily an issue of control over language and thought:

The word of course is one of the most powerful instruments of control as exercised by the newspaper and images as well, there are both words and images in newspapers. . . . Now if you start cutting these up and rearranging them you are breaking down the control system. Fear and prejudice are always dictated by the control system just as the church built up prejudice against heretics This is something that threatens the position of the establishment, of any establishment, and therefore they will oppose it, will condition people to fear and reject or ridicule it. (*The Job* 33-34)

In his own iconoclastic way, Burroughs took the vitriolic opposition to cut-ups in the same vein as the obscenity charges against *Naked Lunch*; he assumed he was doing something right. His desire was to break down conditioned responses, to thwart common expectations of what a novel could be, and the responses he received suggested that he succeeded. But there are also more specific answers to the charges of his critics.

One response to the idea that cut-ups are a type of plagiarism is to reveal the ridiculousness of its premise: that people can "own" words. In *The Adding Machine* essay "Les Voleurs," Burroughs describes how he first reacted upon seeing Brion Gysin's casual use of other writer's words:

I was, I confess, slightly shocked by such overt and traceable plagiarism. I had not quite abandoned the fetish of originality,

though of course the whole sublime concept of total theft is implicit in cut-ups and montage. You see, I had been conditioned to the idea of words as property one's "very own words" and consequently to a deep repugnance for the black sin of plagiarism.

(The Adding Machine 20)

Burroughs comes to realize that words are the building material of the writer, and they belong to anyone who can use them (*The Adding Machine 21*) in the expression of an imaginative vision. The idea of word ownership comes with all kinds of corporate, capitalist, egotistical assumptions that Burroughs wants no part of.

A second response to the charge of plagiarism is to think in Rortyeian terms of vocabularies rather than just words. Burroughs is appropriating other texts as means to his end, the dialectic presentation of his ideas. Just as a philosopher might use pieces of Plato or Dewey while constructing an original argument, Burroughs uses other people's vocabularies as raw material for his dialectic, playing them off against each other and against his own ideas. He does not claim these appropriated parts to be his own; on the contrary, he identifies most of his sources, even the ones that only appear as pieces in cut-ups. But he does claim, rightly, that the resulting work as a whole is his own. Burroughs views all texts as open to appropriation, including his own.

The second criticism against cut-ups, that they have no value, can be handled expediently by showing seven specific ways I have found by which Burroughs uses them in his works. Because he does have such a pragmatic frame of mind, Burroughs often describes in essays and interviews his intended uses for cut-ups, and by reading cut-

ups closely in the context in which they appear, we can see how they affect one's reading experience in profound and original ways.

The first use for cut-ups is to generate new ideas and directions for the writer:

I follow the channels opened by the rearrangement of the text. This is the most important function of the cut-up. I may take a page, cut it up, and get a whole new idea for straight narrative, and not use any of the cut-up material at all, or I may use a sentence or two out of the actual cut-up.

(The Job 29)

By using and combining his texts with outside sources, Burroughs found he could come up with all sorts of phrases, sentences, and ideas for his writing. The randomness of cut-ups is sometimes decried, but this very randomness produces unexpectedly fruitful results. Furthermore, this process isn't fully random, as Burroughs himself notes: "Well you control what you put into your montages; you don't fully control what comes out. That is, I select a page to cut up and I have control over what I put in. I simply fit what comes out of the cut-ups back into a narrative structure" (*The Job 30*). The second chapter of *Cities of the Red Night* serves as an example of the two preceding quotations concerning the generative power of cut-ups as well as Burroughs' conscious, controlled skill in weaving the results into the flow of his novels. In this chapter, a young Chinese army officer discovers a Tibetan village/monastery that has been infected with a genetically modified plague by the CIA. The title of the chapter, "We See Tibet With the Binoculars of the People", came from cut-up work of the early 70's. Burroughs suggests in *The Adding Machine* that this same phrase appears in a book of tape experiments by

Konstantin Rauidive. In any case, Burroughs took this odd little phrase and constructed a self-contained narrative chapter in which someone using “the binoculars of the people” (as Chinese army equipment might be correctly called) looks upon a scene in Tibet. “We See Tibet” includes some of his favorite topics, including viral infection and government experimentation upon an unsuspecting populace, which blend quite smoothly with themes of virus mutation and battles between Manichean forces that are found all throughout *Cities*.

I find this technique to be pragmatic because of its focus on the cash-value of what is produced. In his descriptions of the technique, Burroughs reminds us that there is a great deal of work involved, work which requires an open imagination and a discerning eye, for one may cut up dozens of pages of texts while searching for that one line or passage which will be useful to the work; “some of them are useful from a literary point of view and some are not” (*The Job* 28). This technique encourages the writer to listen for new vocabularies, new modes of imaginative expression, as Rorty and Dewey would put it, and to use them, whatever their source might have been. Furthermore, there is no contention that cut-ups are some sort of guaranteed technique for producing revolutionary works. Burroughs never claims that the cut-up will work for everyone; repeatedly he reminds us that “there are many technologies of writing and a technique that is useful for one writer may be of no use to another. There is no one way to write” (*The Adding Machine* 32). The success or failure of cut-ups as a writing technique, then, depends on the skills of the writer and how effectively cut-ups are employed, as with any other method.

A second use for cut-ups is to remove the power which certain words and phrases have over us. Burroughs calls these associations "word lines," believing that much of the effectiveness of advertising and propaganda comes from the word lines they create and stimulate in our minds. In virtually all of Burroughs' novels we hear the refrain, "Cut Word Lines." Part of Burroughs' thinking here comes from Count Alfred Korzybski, while part of it comes from Scientology. Burroughs read Korzybski and attended some of his lectures in Chicago in the late 1930's, and from him gained ideas about the arbitrary relationship between a word and the object to which the word refers as well as the limiting nature of Aristotelian either / or thinking (Morgan 72). From L. Ron Hubbard's Scientology Burroughs took the idea that words can be linked with memories and stored in the subconscious, subtly influencing thoughts and behaviors (Miles 172). The idea of "Word Lines" is that through repetition and other techniques conducive to mass media, we come to associate clusters of concepts and emotions with certain words. When we hear these words, they trigger automatic responses in us, responses which are to the advantage of Control in some way. For example, Americans during the 50's and 60's were programmed to respond to the word "Communist," even though the word itself was so often invoked in so many different contexts that long ago it ceased to have any recognizable meaning. Now when those in Control desire to label someone derisively, all they need do is invoke the dreaded term, and no one will stop to think whether the label actually applies before the effect has already been produced. Burroughs wants to break down these lines of association, and cut-ups are his primary method for doing so.

The section from *The Ticket That Exploded* entitled "do you love me?" works to

break down word lines built around sex and romantic love. Burroughs often describes sexuality as “The Garden of Earthly Delights,” or “The Orgasm Death Trap,” because he believed sex and love were powerful Control mechanisms. Heterosexuality in particular, with its binary male/female system, is one of many tools used to create conflicts between human beings. The title itself is indicative of these themes of Control, with its interrogative insistence and its susceptibility to binary opposition between “you” and “me,” an opposition Burroughs plays with in many other places. The section opens with little narrative fanfare, proceeding directly to the subject at hand: “The young monk led Bradley to a cubicle—On a stone table was a tape recorder—The monk switched on the recorder and sounds of lovemaking filled the room—The monk took off his robe and stood naked with an erection” (*The Ticket That Exploded* 43). This short opening sets the tone for the rest of this cut-up chapter, showing how our conceptions of romantic love and physical gratification tie us up with sexual strings that can be pulled at will, turning us into puppets. The young monk cannot control his libido; his body betrays his helplessness. Furthermore, his lust is excited by verbal cues coming out of a machine, rather than an actual partner, so word and sound associations trigger the response, not human to human interaction. Burroughs is emphasizing the automatic, involuntary nature of sexuality, showing the ways in which it controls us much more than we control it. As this little introductory scene concludes, the young monk is completely controlled by the sounds of the tape recorder, and the word associations play him like a puppet, forcing him into “a parody of lovemaking as the tape recorder speeded up” (*The Ticket That Exploded* 43). The cut-up section then rubs in the physicality of our sexuality by

juxtaposing it with sickly-sweet lines from various pop tunes: “All the tunes and sound effects of ‘Love’ spit from the recorder permutating sex whine of a sick picture planet: Do you love me?—But I exploded in cosmic laughter—Old acquaintance be forgot?—Oh darling, just a photograph?—Mary I love you, I do do you know i love you through?” (*The Ticket That Exploded* 43-44).

This cut-up forces us to reevaluate our thoughts about love and sex, as every hackneyed, worn-out cliché of romantic love is run through the cut-up mill. Shocking sexual slang is juxtaposed with the most saccharine love song lyrics, revealing the ludicrousness of both these subjects and our mixed-up, pre-programmed notions of them. Burroughs wants to lead us out of the “Garden of Earthly Delights”, the “Orgasm Death Trap,” and into a more free state of mind.

Not every cut-up section can be so easily placed according to theme; many cut-ups are amalgamations of several of William Burroughs’ favorite themes. Plus, any given cut-up, including “do you love me?”, contains random factors that have been cut into it; that’s part of the process. As we read the cut-ups, we are confronted by our own idiosyncratic word lines, some familiar, others not. By going through them, the reader displaces the pre-programmed associations by a combination of juxtaposition of disparate elements, random unplanned elements, and radical dichotomies, such as “Remember every little thing you used to do—I’ve forgotten you then?” (*The Ticket That Exploded* 48-49).

All this cut-up work is designed to reduce either/or thinking and reliance on linear, programmed thought. By disrupting the common patterns of media, everyday

speech, and inner dialogue, William Burroughs hopes to cut the word lines in himself and his readers. Thus, in order for his work to have maximum impact, the ideal Burroughs reader would not just absorb cut-up texts, but would also create them. Just as Burroughs has certain themes (sex, drug addiction, control) that he explores, an intrepid, interactive reader could discover unique issues and idiosyncratic themes by following Burroughs' example. Such a reader would write his own texts, then cut them up along with those authors (Burroughs perhaps among them) whose vocabularies he finds worthy of investigation and appropriation.

A third and closely related purpose for cut-ups is to reveal the hidden agendas and potentials of certain vocabularies. Burroughs himself believed that cut-ups could reveal the future, and this led him to an idea crucial to understanding his work, the idea that writing can create (or re-create) the future.

I would say that my most interesting experience with the earlier techniques was the realization that when you make cut-ups you do not get simply random juxtapositions of words, that they do mean something, and often that these meanings refer to some future event. I've made many cut-ups and then later recognized that the cut-up referred to something that I read later in a newspaper or in a book, or something that happened. To give a very simple example, I made a cut-up of something Mr. Getty had written, I believe for Time and Tide. The following phrase emerged: "It's a bad thing to sue your own father." About three years later his son sued

him. Perhaps events are pre-written and pre-recorded and then you cut word lines the future leaks out. (*The Job* 28)

If we take Burroughs literally, this might sound ridiculous at first, or he may sound like one who believes in predestined fate. I think that he had realized a way to discover hidden meanings in certain vocabularies, to redescribe them in such a way that previously unknown potentials became obvious. If we think of our many vocabularies as tools for both describing and interacting with the world, and we believe his theory that most of our current vocabularies are created and reinforced by our controllers in order to conceal their true agenda, then Burroughs begins to sound like common sense. It then seems only natural that governments and multi-national corporate vocabularies would be arranged in such a way as to allay our suspicions and lull us into complacency, for in doing so they make us all the more tractable to their ends. But when these carefully crafted vocabularies are cut-up, some of their potential meanings and future possibilities may be revealed. Take, for example, a superb cut-up from *Nova Express*, in which Burroughs shows us the hidden agenda of drug law repression:

PLAN DRUG ADDICTION

Now you are asking me whether I want to perpetuate a narcotics problem and I say: “Protect the disease. Must be made criminal protecting society from the disease.”

The problem scheduled in the United States the use of jail, former narcotics plan, addiction and crime for many years—Broad front “Care” of welfare agencies—Narcotics which antedate the use of drugs—The fact

is noteworthy—48 stages—prisoner was delayed—has been separated—
was required—

Addiction in some form is the basis—must be wholly addicts—Any
voluntary capacity subversion of The Will Capital And Treasury Bank—
Infection dedicated to traffic in exchange narcotics demonstrated a
Typhoid Mary who will spread narcotics problem to the United
Kingdom—Finally in view of the cure—cure of the social problem and as
such dangerous to society—

Maintaining addict cancers to our profit—pernicious personal
contact—Market increase—Release The Prosecutor to try any holes—Cut
Up Fighting Drug Addiction by Malcolm Monroe Former Prosecutor, in
Western World, October 1959. (52)

This former drug crusader Monroe, who in the original text espoused the typical
governmental line about the pernicious dangers of drug addicts, now admits (in this cut-
up) how those in authority “PLAN DRUG ADDICTION” so as to insure their own jobs.
They “protect the disease” of drug addiction because it affords them so many
opportunities for scapegoating certain citizens while scaring all the others into obedience.
The police get massive budget increases, while the government obtains income from drug
forfeitures. That their official policy of preventing all drug use is futile is revealed by the
admission of the “Narcotics which antedate drug use,” for indeed alteration of
consciousness through drugs has been a part of human culture since the earliest written
records of the Sumerians, who composed poems in praise of beer. The idea that

governments now can eliminate all drug use is either absurdly arrogant or blatantly false.

The vocabulary of control, cut-up and rearranged, becomes an admission of guilt.

Regardless of whether or not we take Burroughs literally when he talks about cut-ups revealing the future, we can see the cut-up technique as a powerful redescriptive tool which is capable of delineating the potentials of any given vocabulary.

My fourth point about cut-ups is that they help break up the logical conditioning associated with linear narrative. They do so by repeating themes, images, and phrases in a poetic montage, making us aware of how we impose order and meaning upon texts, rather than the texts supplying meaning to us. Here are two excerpts from *The Soft Machine*; the first a cut-up from “Last Hints,” the second a part of a narrative from “Where the Awning Flaps”:

On a sea wall met a boy under the circling albatross—Peeled his red-and-white T-shirt to brown flesh and grey under like ash and passed a joint back and forth as we dropped each other’s pants and he looked down face like Mayan limestone in the Kerosene lamp sputter of burning insect wings over the tide flats—Woke up in other flesh the lookout different—hospital smell of backward countries—(119)

On the sea wall met the guide under the Circling Albatross. Peeled his red- and white-striped T-shirt to brown flesh and grey under like ash and we passed a joint back and forth as we dropped each other’s pants and he

looked down face like Mayan limestone in a Kerosene lamp sputter of
burning insect wings. (122)

The first passage has the textual markers of a cut-up: dashes connect words and phrases, but there is no other punctuation. It also has the disjunctive flow of cut-ups when read, and the odd juxtapositions of images. The narrative voice wakes up “in other flesh,” meaning a transfer of consciousness to a new physical body, another common sign of the cut-up. The second passage has much the same information but in a flowing narrative style with complete sentences. “Circling Albatross” is now capitalized, making it sound like a tavern or shop as opposed to an actual bird. The T-shirt has gone from “red-and-white” to “red- and white-striped.” These small changes illustrate the montage effect of cut-ups in the Nova Trilogy, the most reflexive and self-referential of the cut-up novels. One’s memory and interpretation of previously read passages is challenged and changed as one finds subtly different versions of those passages. Burroughs mimics everyday experience in the textual experience of the cut-up novels through this varied repetition. If we see walk down the same street every day on our way to work, we will most likely see the same images again and again, but there will always be some small changes. We may wonder if we are seeing actual changes, or if our memories are just a bit faulty. In his texts, Burroughs repeats passages and parts of passages, and they become fluid, like memory, forcing us to read even more closely in order to try to impose order and meaning on them.

The variations and repetitions of the cut-ups suggest echo effects, when one hears but not always clearly, so one searches all the more diligently for some sort of pattern .

This echo effect gives Burroughs' works a non-linear unity and a sense of textual "space"—the words and images seem to move and change, appear and reappear in a new guise. They offer no set meaning, only endless possible permutations and interpretations. Like abstract and idiosyncratic poetry, cut-ups make us wonder about the relationship a line of text to its neighboring lines, and we soon become aware of how strong our habit of imposing meaning upon texts really is. We start to sense the discomfort which arises when we can't assimilate one part of a text into our preferred interpretation, and we appreciate how often we try to ignore or discount those discordant elements. Diligent readers of cut-ups begin to work on the assumption that each string of words within a pair of dashes is itself a vocabulary, a unit of meaning. This assumptive understanding leads the readers into a familiarity with dialectic, the play of one vocabulary against others. Thus, cut-ups are ironic in the Rortyeian sense, for "the ironist's preferred form of argument is dialectical in the sense that she takes the unit of persuasion to be a vocabulary rather than a proposition" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 78). As we read cut-up novels, we are led to notice the conjunctions and intersections of vocabularies as we see passages in both whole and cut-up forms. As we read a phrase from an earlier (or later) narrative section that has been cut into the chapter we are currently reading, we get shades of meaning from that earlier passage blended into whatever meaning we may be provisionally constructing. For example, let us look at another excerpt from "Where the Awning Flaps":

Panama clung to our bodies from Las Palmas to David on camphor sweet
smell of cooking paregoric—Burned down the republic—The druggist no

glot clom Fliday—Panama mirrors of 1910 under seal in any drugstore—
He threw in the towel morning light on cold coffee stale breakfast table—
little cat smile—pain and death smell of his sickness in the room with
me—three souvenir shorts of Panama City—Old friend came and stayed
all day face eaten by “I need more”—I have noticed this in the New
World— (*The Soft Machine* 123)

In its context as part of a cut-up section, this passage reads like a free verse poem, full of images prosaic and bizarre. Each little phrase within a pair of dashes may be read as a unit of meaning, but the excerpt also has suggestive power as whole. The recurring theme of drug addiction, for instance, gains prominence as one reads the whole section, but this interpretation does not prevent one from having small, unrelated images juxtaposing themselves with the addiction images. Random elements in cut-ups, like the “little cat smile” above, can be fit into the drug theme, but not in a final or seamless way. When reading sections like this, we see how there are always multiple meanings flashing in our heads, but we nonetheless want to narrow down these possibilities to try to construct a coherent narrative. The best cut-up sections, such as the one above, make us aware of these tendencies while still slightly resisting them. Total coherence is always a bit beyond our reach.

For those well-versed in other parts of the Burroughs canon, cut-ups also stimulate the “echo” effect when he cuts in bits and pieces from previous works. Compare the preceding excerpt from *The Soft Machine* with this Burroughs letter from 1953:

Bill Gains was in town and he has burned downⁱⁱⁱ the Republic of Panama from Las Palmas to David on paregoric. Before Gains, Panama was a p.g. town. You could buy four ounces in any drug store. Now the druggists are balky and the Chamber of Deputies was about to pass a special Gains Law when he threw in the towel and went back to Mexico. I was getting off junk and he kept nagging me why was I kidding myself, once a junky always a junky. . . and looking at me with his little cat smile. (*Word Virus* 96)

This letter from Panama, a narrative of paregoric, addiction, outrageous behavior, and memories of Billy Bradshinkel, Burroughs' high school prom date, is cut into "Where the Awning Flaps", a cut-up of homoerotica, Panama scenes, paregoric, and the beach, where the awnings flap in the sea breeze. The alienation and bitterness in William Burroughs' letters from his voyage in search of the "telepathic" drug Yage echo in the cut-up, adding associational depth to the section. We can feel the emotional resonance through the cut-ups of older material, even though we may not always be able to remember the source.

The fifth way Burroughs uses cut-ups is as connectors of narrative segments. The cut-up section "Naborhood in Aqualungs" shows how Burroughs, a writer who generally eschews continuity and linear plot structures in his novels, still manages to keep some unity and coherence in these works. Here he uses the cut-up piece to connect the opening of the chapter, featuring Nova Criminals Limestone John and an anonymous narrator, with the subsequent section "The Fish Poison Con", a scam artist piece set in middle America featuring The Sailor and Burroughs' alter-ego Beat narrator getting their

drug and sex kicks. Here is a piece of The Carbonic Caper:

Recollect when I was traveling with Limestone John on The Carbonic Caper—It worked like this: He rents an amphitheater with marble walls he is a stone painter you dig can create a frieze while you wait—So he puts on a diving suit like an old Surrealist Lark and I am up on a high pedestal pumping the air to him—Well, he starts painting on the limestone walls with hydrochloric acid and jetting himself around with air blasts he can cover the wall in ten seconds, carbon dioxide settling down on the marks begin to cough and loosen their collars. (*Nova Express* 3)

This is classic Nova Conspiracy material, featuring the street hustler lingo of Burroughs' Times Square days and the bizarre storyline of a routine. The next excerpt is a section from the Fish Poison Con, a more autobiographical routine filled with observations on the ugliness of America:

I was traveling with Merit Inc. checking store attendants for larceny with a crew of “shoppers”—There was two middle-aged cunts one owning this Chihuahua which whimpered and yapped in a cocoon of black sweaters and Bob Schafer Crew Leader who was an American Fascist with Roosevelt jokes—It happens in Iowa this number comes over the radio: “Old Sow Got Caught in the Fence Last Spring”—And Schafer said “Oh my God, are we ever in Hicksville.” (*The Soft Machine* 23)

These two narratives are similar because of the con-artistry in their storylines and their terminology. But Burroughs manages to more closely tie the two together by inserting

the cut-up collage “Naborhood in Aqualungs” in between them:

I was traveling with Merit John on The Carbonic Caper—Larceny with a crew of shoppers—And this number comes over the air to him—So he starts painting The D Fence last Spring—And shitting himself around with air blasts in Hicksville—Stepped ten seconds and our carbon dioxide gave out and we began to cough for such a purpose suffocating under a potted palm in the lobby—

“Move on, you dig, clopping out ‘The Fish Poison Con.’”

“I got you—Keep it practical and they can’t—“ (*The Soft Machine*

19)

Although a montage of two different narratives, this resulting cut-up still reads with surprising clarity, but as always with cut-ups, the reader has to participate actively and imaginatively in the construction of meaning. “Naborhood in Aqualungs” mixes material primarily from the two narrative sections it connects, sections which would otherwise seem unrelated, the transition between them abrupt. Poetically, these two pieces have been unified by the cut-up, which blends together words and images from the narratives, creating new images in the process. Only by carefully reading and re-reading both narrative sections can we fully appreciate the blends created in the cut-up. Additionally, readers will normally read them in order, with the cut-up in the middle, so when reading the cut-up one notices mostly the familiar material from the Carbonic Caper, filtering out the “Fish Poison Con” parts or incorporating them into a constructed narrative of the reader’s own. Only after reading “The Fish Poison Con” does the reader understand how

the cut-up actually connects the other two sections. The reader's perception of "The Fish Poison Con" will also be affected by the presence of material made already familiar by its inclusion in the cut-up section, which has already been assimilated, forcing the reader to reevaluate, only twenty-three pages into the novel, the whole experience of the chapter.

The sixth way Burroughs uses cut-ups is as a signal indicating a shift in the scene, moving characters and/or the narrative perspective from one place and time to another. These shifts have always tended to be abrupt even before cut-ups; such shifts are another way in which Burroughs defies the usual linear progression of storytelling. As he says in his Atrophied Preface to *Naked Lunch*:

Why all this waste paper getting The People from one place to another?
Perhaps to spare The Reader stress of sudden space shifts and keep him
Gentle? And so a ticket is bought, a taxi is called, a plane boarded. . . If
one of my people is seen in New York walking around in citizen clothes
and next sentence Timbuctu putting down lad talk on a gazelle-eyed
youth, we may assume that he (the party non-resident of Timbuctu)
transported himself there by the usual methods of communication . . .
(*Word Virus* 167)

Later, cut-ups will enhance this idea, since Burroughs sees cut-ups as a means of moving the mind through space and time imaginatively, much like scene shifts in film.

Burroughs often applies ideas and techniques from filmmaking to his writing. He believes that when we are projecting our consciousness into cut-ups of texts and images of other places or times, we are constructing alternative timelines which which we can

interact. For instance, “The Mayan Caper” in *The Soft Machine* is a how-to manual of cut-up time travel. The narrator begins with text cut-ups and fold-ins: “--Now when I fold today’s paper in with yesterday’s paper and arrange the pictures to form a time section montage, I am literally moving back to the time when I read yesterday’s paper, that is traveling in time back to yesterday—“ (82). By working with newspapers, photos, novels, letters, magazines, and other printed media of a given era, the narrator projects himself into the past. Time is a fluid concept rather than a static one, and by using the right tools we can imaginatively place ourselves in radically different contexts.

After the initial textual cut-ups, the narrator moves on; “The next step was carried out in a film studio—I learned to talk and think backward on all levels—This was done by running film and sound track backward—“ (*The Soft Machine* 82). Using the kind of multi-media approach from his experimental cut-up phase, Burroughs breaks down further the restrictions of linear narrative, running the whole operation in reverse. Burroughs also sometimes uses cut-ups to graphically represent the shift of perspective from one place to another without the interpolation of a narrator (see for example *The Wild Boys* 110), with similar effect. Near the end of this chapter, I will also explain how Burroughs shifts the narrative perspective without using cut-ups.

The seventh use for cut-ups is to represent various internal experiences. For example, in “The Public Agent”, Burroughs shows, through the use of cut-ups, the psychopathic, destructive, hate-filled mind of an Agent of Control. The agent’s narrative voice floats in and out of narrative scenes, in between which are cut-up segments which display the mind of the agent:

So I am a public agent and the whole trough a light pink instruction from street. I winked at the commuters. "Conversation I snap out of queers," I sniffed warningly. "It's a spot up on my back cases." Queers supporting the floor like the three monkeys. "Grobe movies and Turkish our own," I said warmly and walked exempt narcotic. Cool boys chase each other with the first one of the day. To a Turkish Bath and surprised you bloody nance. Soapy towel glove hit him in the lungs and eyes spattered: Ping! And walked into the gabardine topcoats. Five minutes to that broken fruit. (*The Soft Machine* 29)

Because the agent's voice is the narrative voice, this interpolation of cut-up and narrative is especially effective at drawing us into the mind of the sociopathic agent. The dissociative juxtapositions of these cut-ups, full of images by turn viciously violent and mundane, work to expose us to the inner experiences of a disordered perspective. We experience the distorted, hateful thought patterns, rather than simply having them described to us.

Another good example of the use of cut-ups to present internal experience comes early in *The Soft Machine*, in which Burroughs uses cut-ups to depict the bizarre sensations of a drug addict's withdrawal. In the opening segment, "Dead on Arrival," Burroughs reworks material from his Word Hoard from the old New York Beat era, featuring such familiar characters as The Sailor, Bill Gains, and Doctor Benway. The predominant theme of drug addiction and the cut-up technique are especially suited to each other:

Junky in east bath room. . . invisible and persistent dream body. . . familiar face maybe. . . scored for some time or body. . . in that grey smell of rectal mucus. . . night cafeterias and junky room dawn smells. Three hours from Lexington made it five times. . . soapy egg flesh. . .

“These double papers he claims of withdrawal.”

“Well I thought you was quitting. . . “

“I can’t make it.”

“Impossible quitar eso.”

Got up and fixed in the sick dawn flutes of Ramadan (*The Soft Machine* 8)

Here Burroughs has also chosen to use ellipses, rather than the usual dashes, to join together cut-up phrases. The cut-ups here give a dreamlike quality, not unlike that of opiate intoxication. This is noticeably different from the previous cut-up, for we do not experience violence, instead a jumbled stream of images and phrases. The experience is that of disorder and lack of focus, but not mental pathology.

As effective as the cut-ups are for depicting non-ordinary states of mind, the most important point Burroughs makes through their use is that they can represent everyday experience as well. Our lives and our thoughts are not linear; by editing and shaping our experience they become linear. We fool ourselves into ignoring the multitude of ways in which we are influenced by commercial advertising in electronic and printed media, all of which present images of how we should think and act as consumers. This programming by outside sources blends with all of our other experiences, such as what we see when we

walk down the street or other daily routines, and we seldom take notice of how the story of our lives is created. Burroughs wants to draw our attention to both the effects of outside influences and our own participation in the construction of our narratives. By using cut-ups he can move beyond linear narrative and take writing in new directions:

Writing is still confined in the sequential representational straitjacket of the novel, a form as arbitrary as the sonnet and as far removed from the actual facts of human perception and consciousness as that fifteenth-century poetical form. Consciousness is a cut-up; life is a cut-up. Every time you walk down the street or look out the window, your stream of consciousness is cut by random factors. (*The Adding Machine* 61)

These new directions will move people out of the limitations imposed by sequential narrative, a limitation most never realize they work under. To put it in Rorty's terms, Burroughs is offering new possibilities for self-creation narratives pointing out that all narratives of self are created, even the ones that claim not to be.

Burroughs is not creating a dichotomy or a hierarchy; he uses both cut-ups and straight narrative to make this point. He is not arguing against narrative, but rather showing us some assumptions we didn't realize that we were making. If we think our stories are just out there, waiting to be discovered, we are missing the point. We must actively seek out the raw material for our narratives and put it together ourselves: "You will receive your instructions in many ways. From books, street signs, films, in some cases from agents who purport to be and may actually be members of the organization. There is no certainty. Those who need certainty are of no interest to this department"

(*The Ticket That Exploded* 10). Those who cannot handle the contingency of self, language, and culture are better off sticking with foundationalist narratives, which offer definite premises and necessary conclusions. Rorty believes that our culture as a whole can move past foundationalism and into acceptance of contingency, but he often hedges his bets by implying that intellectuals, the educated, and other special groups are more disposed to his pragmatist system than the general population, so intellectuals must take the lead. Burroughs says more explicitly that some people are ready and willing to make this move, while others are either incapable or simply don't want to leave the comfort and security of stable belief systems. For both Rorty and Burroughs, writers (and creative people in general) are heroes, because they have the required vision, independence, and bravery for self-creation. The prospect that there is not and never will be any certainty can be daunting, but Burroughs wants to describe a world of expanded horizons in such a way as to make it desirable.

As a writer, Burroughs hopes to change the way his readers perceive themselves and their world. Cut-ups for him are a powerful tool which can be used to give readers experiences beyond those contained in linear narrative. Burroughs is interested in all levels of experience, even those which are irrational or indescribable. Rather than worry about fitting his works into traditional form of the novel, with all its requirements of sequence, plot, and continuity, he strives to present a different picture of human experience; one which more accurately depicts the fragmented, disjointed way in which the world makes impact upon all our senses, and this move away from easy, safe continuity to complex, multi-layered chaos always entails risk and misunderstandings:

When people speak of clarity in writing they generally mean plot, continuity, beginning middle and end, adherence to a 'logical' sequence. But things don't happen in logical sequence and people don't think in logical sequence. Any writer who hopes to approximate what actually occurs in the mind and body of his characters cannot confine himself to such an arbitrary structure as 'logical' sequence. Joyce was accused of being unintelligible and he was presenting only one level of cerebral events: conscious sub-vocal speech. I think it is possible to create multilevel events and characters that a reader could comprehend with his entire organic being. (*The Job* 35)

There is no getting around it: cut-up works like *Port of Saints* or *The Wild Boys* are difficult to read and assimilate. They present many challenges and require much of the reader. But that does not mean that we as students and teachers of literature should shy away from works that incorporate the cut-up technique. Even without background material as assistance, a diligent reader can carry away distinct experiences after reading Burroughs. Despite their resistance to conventional, argumentative, logical analysis, cut-up works merit the kind of attention we give to other experimentalist authors such as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and Djuna Barnes. In saying this I join a growing number of critics who have recognized and attempted to explicate Burroughs' achievement. Timothy Murphy, author of the most recent book-length critical work on Burroughs, says

[R]eaders who call the cut-ups simply destructive are irresponsible, however, and their reactions often stem from misunderstanding of the

technique, coupled with a refusal to learn how to read cut-up texts (and, often, a refusal to look at the texts at all). Once its fundamental strategies are understood, the Nova trilogy is no more difficult to read than Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* or Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, two "unreadable" works which have experienced popular and scholarly revivals of interest in recent years. (104)

Jennie Skerl sees cut-ups as a useful extension of Burroughs' writing technique that continues the experimentalism of *Naked Lunch*:

For Burroughs as an artist, the cutup is an impersonal method of inspiration, invention, and an arrangement that redefines the work of art as a process that occurs in collaboration with others and is not the sole property of the artists. Thus Burroughs' cutup texts are comparable to similar contemporary experiments in other arts, such as action painting, happenings, and aleatory music. His theory of the cutup also parallels avant-garde literary theory, such as structuralism and deconstruction. (50)

These comparisons of Burroughs to other radical departures from tradition point out how art and art criticism move in linked cycles. As a new artist rises up to challenge the status quo, critics at first often dismiss the effort, but in time people learn how to appreciate the innovator, who then becomes accepted and critiqued as part of an expanded canon. It took time for people to accept Impressionism and Be-Bop; it is time now for people to take Burroughs seriously as well.

Now we can move on to Burroughs' second distinctive technique, the routine.

Routines are short, usually self-contained comic monologues. Routines may be stand-alone short stories, or may appear as an episode in a novel. *Junky*, *Queer*, and *Naked Lunch* all rely heavily on routines since Burroughs had not yet incorporated the cut-up technique into his writing. Routines first developed simply as imaginative storytelling during the period when Burroughs did not yet consider himself a writer. Only the occasional collaborative effort, such as “Twilight’s Last Gleamings” with the help of Kells Elvins, gave any indication that Burroughs would devote himself to the “Shakespeare Squadron.” Morphine (along with other opiates) and lack of self-confidence were the primary factors in Burroughs’ lack of production, and routines were an important verbal outlet for his storytelling skills, helping him develop the tools of his trade even when he wasn’t writing.

Routines lend themselves well to Burroughs’ fragmented, episodic style, for like cut-ups they can start and end abruptly with only a tangential connection to surrounding text. In routines we can clearly see Burroughs’ use of humor, irony, and shock value:

Routines are completely spontaneous and proceed from whatever fragmentary knowledge you have. . . in fact a routine is by nature fragmentary and inaccurate. There is no such thing as an exhaustive routine, nor does the scholarly-type mind run to routines. . . pure laughter that accompanies a good routine. . . gives a moment’s freedom from the cautious, nagging, aging, frightened flesh. (*El Hombre Invisible* 77)

Routines as described above are Burroughs’ closest stylistic connection to the other Beats. When he describes them as spontaneous, we may immediately call to mind

Kerouac's writing dictum of "first thought, best thought." Routines are imaginative storytelling at its most unrestrained; when we read them we never know what direction they will take next. Since irony is a major link between Burroughs and Rorty, we will devote more space to it later, and concentrate here on the other two features, humor and shock value.

Both these features, humor and shock value, remind us that routines are based on appeal to an audience. Originally, this audience was attractive young men whom Burroughs wanted to charm into a sexual relationship. In his introduction to *Queer*, Burroughs sees the transition from *Junky* to *Queer* in terms of audience: his alter ego in *Junky*, Lee, is self-contained while on junk, needing little in the way of human contact, while in *Queer* Lee searches desperately for a personal connection of some kind:

While the addict is indifferent to the impression he creates in others, during withdrawal he may feel the compulsive need for an audience, and this is clearly what Lee seeks in Allerton: an audience, an acknowledgement of his performance. . . so he invents a frantic attention-getting format which he calls the Routine: shocking, funny, riveting. (xv)

This sense of audience which characterizes the early routine writing marks a stage of development in Burroughs as a writer. He realizes he wants to make a definite impression upon his audience. Later, he will learn to internalize this audience and will go beyond the impulse to impress a particular person. But he always adheres to the goal of making his writing live in the experience of the reader. "A routine, like a bullfight, needs an audience. In fact the audience is an integral part of the routine. But unlike a bullfight,

the routine can endanger the audience” (*Interzone* 127).

Repeatedly Burroughs underscores the outrageousness of the routine. Routines give him freedom to develop characters in a narrative format, play with dialogue in a variety of voices and dialects. In the routines in *Queer* we get Texan dialects in the Oil-Man routine, Middle Eastern jargon in Corn-Hole Gus’ Used Slave Lot. The outrageousness of the play in routines comes from the urge to shock his audience while amusing and enthralling them at the same time. He wants to push the limits of what they will listen to as far as possible without actually driving them off. Both the characters and the action tend towards the outrageous. Corn-Hole Gus the Used-Slave Trader and Spare Ass Annie are good examples of the types of characters one meets in a Burroughs routine. The action usually revolves around the comically obscene, such as when Bobo the Queen’s falling piles get sucked out of a car and wrap around the rear tire: “He was completely gutted, leaving an empty shell sitting there on the giraffe-skin upholstery. Even the eyes and brain went, with a horrible shlugging sound” (*Queer* 40). During the Chess Player routine, his protagonist Lee pauses, “The routine was coming to him like dictation. He did not know what he was going to say next but he suspected the monologue was about to get dirty” (*Queer* 66). This sense of imminent danger comes from the spontaneity of the routine; Lee works by feeling the reactions of his audience and his outrageous humor could spill over into non-humorous bad taste at any moment.

Part of the humor of routines comes out of this spontaneous peril; the same sort of laughter which can arise out of fear or nervousness. Comedians famous for challenging both their audiences and social conventions, like Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman, use

this same technique of fearful humor which pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable. This is the dangerous element that Burroughs talks about in relation to routines; he feels that if they don't risk shocking the audience, then they haven't gone far enough. The rest of the laughter comes from the sheer excessiveness of the routine. The playfulness of ridiculous situations, like unlicensed condom peddlers and a man who teaches his anus to talk, are what makes routines irresistible despite their obscene content. Early routine work, like "Twilight's Last Gleamings" and *Queer*, allowed him to develop his talent for outraging people's sensibilities, which he will apply both within and beyond the routine format for the rest of his career. In *The Adding Machine* essay "Beauty and the Bestseller," Burroughs contrasts his own willingness to shock with the publishing industry's fear of it, saying "If your purpose is to make a lot of money on a book or a film, there are certain rules to observe. . . never expect a general public to experience anything they don't want to experience" (22). He is pointing out how this profit motive insures that most popular art will remain devoid of content which shocks or challenges the audience, thereby preserving their complacency. His motives are just the opposite, for unlike the popular author whose starting point is "how do I sell as many units as possible?", Burroughs' begins by asking "how do I show people things they never imagined?" Answering this question will necessarily involve shocking their sensibilities, because new realms of imaginative experience aren't always pleasant. A writer shouldn't have to worry, in his opinion, about separating out the "appropriate" from the "inappropriate" parts. If he tried for commercial reasons to edit out certain portions of his experience, the audience would be denied the honesty and integrity of Burroughs'

work, which spares no detail and makes no apologies for what it is. “The writer cannot pull back from what he finds because it shocks or upsets him, or because he fears the disapproval of the reader” (*The Adding Machine* 33), Burroughs says, because in doing so he would be censoring himself before even submitting his work to the publisher. In his mind, such commercial considerations will produce only commercial works, which can sell but have no element of risk or originality.

Shock value is an important component of Burroughs’ writing because he wants both to amuse and edify his audience. The reader laughs because of the bizarre nature of the action and characters; thus Burroughs works through transgression of cultural taboos. Like an extended dirty joke which is funny only because we think that certain body parts and functions are shameful and shouldn’t be mentioned, the routine relies on its power to break through social conditioning. This shock value gets his audience’s attention, but there are also subtle symbolic gestures in his routines. They invite us to question the taboos they break. The Oil-Man routine (*Queer* 29-32) pokes fun at the Good Ol’ Boy network in Texas, the Bobo the Queen bit (*Queer* 39-40) makes light of homosexuality, The Man Who Taught His Asshole to Talk (*Naked Lunch* 132-135) ridicules our notions of mind-body separation (and can even be read as an allegory of the growth of bureaucratic power in democracies), and the Tibetan Holy Man (*Queer* 81-82) routine tackles the sanctity we with which we shroud our religious figures.

How is all this ribald humor pragmatic? Rorty suggests that we stop using a hierarchical system of thought in which argument takes precedence over literature, and in the routine Burroughs is using narrative to make his points about art, culture, Western

thought, and the body. These routines offer a radically different vocabulary from standard argumentation, a vocabulary which suggests that nothing and no one is sacred and safe from ridicule. They lead us into a narrative space where we can laugh at our prejudices and preconceptions, which then lose some of their hold over us. As a result we become more likely to question, to investigate, and to consider alternative points of view. In other words, routines offer a redescriptive vocabulary based on humor, and that vocabulary offers an imaginative vision which offers possibilities for the transformation of the individual and society.

The third pragmatic technique Burroughs employs is the literalization of metaphor, which like shock value can be found in routines but is not limited to them. Just as the name implies, Burroughs takes a common figure of speech and makes its metaphorical qualities literal. He takes particular joy in pointing out the ridiculous thinking and behavior which results when people follow their metaphors too closely. For instance, in the short piece “Seeing Red” from *Exterminator!*, Burroughs takes the line about pornography destroying society, so often used by censors and guardians of morality, and presents it as a literal event. Lee, Burroughs’ alter ego, gets stopped at customs, as the author himself was so many times. This time, Lee has a surprise for the nosy customs agents: a picture of an attractive, sensuous, naked young boy playing a flute. In stereotypical fashion, the agents are disgusted by the picture, but it also fascinates them, and they can’t stop looking at it and talking about it. Like the anti-pornography crusaders who maintain vast collections of the very thing they claim to hate, these customs agents reveal their repressed desires by clustering around the picture. They

become enthralled, forgetting completely about Lee, who surreptitiously slips out before the agents are killed by their own sick fascination. In characteristic style, Burroughs makes their end a messy one by having their heads explode, thus making literal all the exaggerated claims about how dangerous to impressionable minds allegedly “pornographic” art and literature can be.

This is very much the sort of ironic redescription of vocabularies that Rorty talks about. Rorty suggested that from time to time, someone needs to come along and do some verbal housecleaning, sweeping out all the old, stale, worn-out metaphors and replacing them with new ones. Burroughs is quite dedicated to this task, revealing how many of our repressive, racist, fascist, and otherwise undesirable ideas come from the language we use to form our thoughts and speech. Like cut-ups, literalizing these old metaphors is a way of “cutting word lines,” of getting rid of old patterns of thought and speech so that we can begin creating or absorbing new ones. For example, the routine of the Talking Asshole literalizes the metaphors of mind-body separation, a Cartesian dualism that Burroughs ridicules frequently. Burroughs sets up this literalization by creating a scene in which someone’s body splits off from the mind’s control and asserts its own independent will. The humor lies in Burroughs’ symbolic choice for the new controlling body part: the anus, which ranks probably lowest on the hierarchy of people’s preferred organs. This literalized metaphor shows us that we don’t have the absolute control over our bodies that we would like to think we have, and it points out the consequences of what might happen if the mind and body really were separate organisms: the mind, which we Westerners see as the seat of our “selves,” might lose out to the body,

the part of us that Christian dogma has taught us to fear and despise.

But ironist writers like Burroughs are not the only ones who can take metaphors literally. Certain kinds of foundationalists also have this tendency, although to vastly different ends. Foundationalists entertain no doubts whatsoever about the final vocabulary they use to describe themselves and their world, and as a result tend to become highly intolerant of other interpretations. Whenever there is a specific written script for that foundationalist's final vocabulary, as is the case for Christians, Jews, and Muslims, that text tends to become enshrined and mummified so as to disallow any alterations or competing interpretations of it. This does not happen with all such people, only with a small but highly vocal minority, who can best be described as zealots^{iv}.

For zealots, the goal is to narrow the possibilities for interpretation as much as possible, so in the end the only possible acceptable interpretation of the text will be their own. One of the best ways to achieve this end is to insist upon literal interpretation. By controlling the ways in which people are allowed to speak about texts, vested interests can control the values and policies which arise out of those texts. For example, conservative^v policy makers and pundits have recently made much of the literal interpretation of the Constitution in its descriptions of how the Census should be undertaken. This was not done just out of conscience or respect for that document, since the same conservative forces do not push for strict following of the Constitution when it comes to issues of search and seizure in drug policy. The literal interpretation of the Census procedures insured that fewer minority and poor citizens would be counted, thus reducing their representation and funding, a trend which the right wing tends to favor.

But such vested interests never admit to such an agenda, preferring instead to claim the sanctity of literal interpretation. By showing the end-products of such literalness, ironists like Burroughs can show us how being literal is often just an excuse for being cruel and selfish.

Beyond just protecting vested interests, true zealots often insist on literalness even when it isn't in anyone's favor, simply because it limits the "approved" ways of speaking about important texts. In other words, it is simply an issue of control. Take, for example, the Christian Right's insistence on the evils of homosexuality, a trait which certainly did not endear them to Burroughs. Persecuting homosexuals (and trying to strike down anti-discriminatory laws which could help protect them) doesn't really benefit anyone, including the Christian Right, but they insist upon it nonetheless. Ironists like Burroughs do just the opposite; they increase the proliferation of meanings which can be derived from texts. He does so by casting foundationalist literal interpretations in a horrific and/or ridiculous manner, making them by turns repulsive and ludicrous. Burroughs calls into question the basic assumptions of commonly-held viewpoints, and one of the best ways to do that is to make us look more closely at the terms and images we use to express those viewpoints.

In *Ghost of Chance*, Burroughs takes several of the literal interpretations of the Bible seriously, and in doing so makes them utterly insane:

The Literalists—or "Lits" as they came to be known—actually put the words of Christ into disastrous practice. Now Christ says if some son of a bitch takes half your clothes, give him the other half. Accordingly, Lits

stalk the streets looking for muggers and strip themselves mother naked at the sight of one. Many unfortunate muggers were crushed under scrimmage pileups of half-naked Lits. (35)

Burroughs continues in this vein by showing a few of the other bizarre antics of the Literalists, including criminals who go around begging their enemies for forgiveness, and special services arising to provide professional enemies to those unfortunate Lits unable to scare up any of their own. Through the use of shocking and humorous images, Burroughs shows us the ridiculous results of a literalist agenda.

The fourth and last technique I will discuss in relation to Burroughs' pragmatism is his manipulation of vocabularies and narrative perspectives. I have already explained how he sometimes uses cut-ups to achieve this effect, but just as shock value can be seen as a technique on its own and is not confined to routines, perspective shift is frequently used without cut-ups as a marker. Readers can learn to recognize these shifts by the change in vocabulary, although Burroughs may also graphically indicate the shift with dashes or ellipses. For example, in *Nova Express* he moves from his hustler-reporter persona, distinguished by the use of street hustler and Beat slang, to a young Mexican boyfriend, distinguished by the use of Spanish and Mexican slang:

I woke out of a light yen sleep when the Japanese girl came in--Three silver digits exploded in my head--I walked out into streets of Madrid and won a football pool--felt the Latin mind clear and banal as sunlight met Paco by the soccer scores and he said: "Que tal Henrique?"

And I went to see my amigo who was taking medicina again and

he had no money to give me and didn't want to do anything but take more medicina and stood there waiting for me to leave so he could take it after saying he was not going to take anymore so I said, "William no me hagas caso". (26)

The reader is led quite abruptly from the perspective of one character into that of another through vocabulary shift. The only graphic marker is the paragraph break. Burroughs does this frequently and deliberately, playing vocabularies off against each other in dialectic fashion. The author, reader, and characters escape the confines of physicality by imagination, through which a change in language means a change in persona.

The destabilizing of identity which accompanies frequent and abrupt vocabulary shifting helps undermine the fundamental binary opposition of Self / Other thinking, the type of pattern which Burroughs believed to be one of the most divisive and destructive. Burroughs wants his readers to experience the blurring and merging of identities through his works in order to break our conditioning and enable us think beyond this dichotomy:

Consider the IS of identity. When I say to be me, to be you, to be myself, to be others--Whatever I may be called upon to be or say that I am--I am not the verbal label "myself." The word BE in English contains, as a virus contains, its precoded message of damage, the categorical imperative of permanent condition. (*The Job* 200)

This either/or dichotomy is another of the "word lines" that Burroughs cuts, and perspective shift is a distinct and specifically directed tool for cutting it. He sometimes indicates this shift with ellipses, as in this science fiction piece from *The Ticket That*

Exploded:

. . He's going to eat you slow and nasty. . . This situation here has given rise to what the head shrinkers call 'ideas of persecution' among our personnel and a marked slump in morale. . As I write this I have barricaded myself in a ward room against the second lieutenant who claims he is 'God's little hang boy sent special to me' that fucking shave tail I can hear him out there whimpering and slobbering and the Colonel is jacking off in front of the window pointing to a Gemini Sex Skin (5).

The first sentence is the voice of the second lieutenant who is under the control of the Sex Skin, the second is a psychoanalyst commenting on the scene, while the third is an unfortunate Tech Sargent who is about to be consumed by the Sex Skin fiends. Each break into a different perspective is marked by ellipses (or sometimes just a pair of dots or a dash), but there is no other specific pattern followed; some perspectives present only a single image of horror or fear, while others run for paragraphs or pages. There is no predicting when the next shift will occur; Burroughs lets each one have its say, short or long. Again, notice how each one has its own vocabulary. The psychoanalytic voice is dry and technical, while the voice of the frightened Tech Sargent is breathlessly full of swear words. This is dialectic as Rorty describes it, the play of various vocabularies off each other.

Burroughs' use of dialectic routines and cut-ups all fit into a pragmatic framework. Each technique is designed to provide the reader with edifying experiences, as Rorty would put it. Furthermore, the author is reaching for new realms of imaginative

experience, which according to Dewey is one of the hallmarks of worthwhile art: it allows for new expressions to fit changing times. In his desire to know the real-world effects of his ideas, and to investigate the cash-value (the outcome or product) of all writings, including his own, William Burroughs is an American Pragmatist. In the next chapter, I will show how he fits a Rortyeian role as Liberal Ironist. Using Dewey's ideas about synthesis, I cover some of the ways in which Burroughs' work can be connected to political and social issues.

ⁱ I realize this looks awkward, but as Burroughs said, the idea of simultaneity is difficult to project in prose. I put both present and past tense because time lines blend and merge in this and other Burroughs books, making it difficult to say whether any particular event occurs alongside, before, or after another. In other words, I am trying to convey the sense of non-linear structure that I obtained from the book itself.

ⁱⁱ This may be compared in our own time to the controversy over rappers' uses of samples from other artists. These artists often felt that their beats and melodies had been "stolen" by the rappers. The rappers, on the other hand, claimed that they were using the samples openly as part of an original work. The controversy has since died down after it became standard practice to acknowledge sources by listing all the artists who have been sampled in the compact disc's credits.

ⁱⁱⁱ The phrase "burned down" is street slang for a place drug users can no longer visit because one of their number has already acted so badly that the authorities are now on alert there.

^{iv} Although the religious connotation of this term is certainly appropriate, I am using the word more in the general sense of one who has excessive passion about any belief or system of values. Although Burroughs attacks all foundationalist thought, he reserves his most vitriolic condemnations for those who are fanatical in their foundationalism, and these extremists are the ones I choose to call zealots. The danger of these people in Burroughs' eyes is two fold; they excite others towards hatred and intolerance through their words, and they are usually the ones most willing to act on their beliefs even to the point of harming or killing those they see as living in contradiction of their coveted belief systems.

^v Although we could draw historical parallels between intolerance and conservatism, it is equally true that liberals can be zealots too, as witnessed by groups like Earth First! and PETA. Burroughs could at times have as much disdain for certain kinds of liberals as he could for conservatives.

CHAPTER 3

THE LIBERAL AND IRONIST POLITICS OF WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS

Americans have a long history of liberal politics; we come out of a culture which pays due attention (and even more lip-service) to the ideals of a liberal democracy. Although we could easily devise a long list of times and places in which we have failed to live up to these liberal ideals, this only confirms the contention that we need to broaden and deepen our discussion of these issues, finding newer and better ways to put them into practice. American pragmatism is part of this progressive, liberal tradition. Dewey and Rorty agree that philosophy should serve the needs of actual human beings, making their lives better, offering their futures greater possibilities. Rorty calls for a liberal democratic society which promotes human solidarity while still allowing for individual liberties. In order to promote the liberal practices (rather than just liberal theory) which would make such a society possible, Rorty sketches a figure he calls the “liberal ironist,” who would be the ideal citizen of his liberal democracy. To explain the liberal part, Rorty borrows Judith Shklar’s definition, who says that “liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do” (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* xv). The ironist part, which means someone who accepts the contingency of their own final vocabulary and enjoys experimenting with others, was covered in the first chapter of this work.

Although Rorty has done good work by bringing pragmatism back into discussion, he has attracted a great deal of criticism, some of it spiteful, some of it warranted. In his insightful study of Rorty’s liberal ironism, *The Last Conceptual*

Revolution, Eric Gander points out some of the problems in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. He thinks that Rorty omits or glosses over some of the difficult issues in liberalism. In particular, Gander takes issue with Rorty's (and Shklar's) definition of what it means to be liberal. Gander takes the definition to mean that only the willful and deliberate infliction of suffering is cruelty, so Rorty is only concerned with the motivation for acts which cause suffering. Otherwise, accidental harm caused to someone else could also be called cruelty: "it seems that Rorty can either remain on the surface and dispense with Shklar's definition of cruelty, or, he can embrace this notion of cruelty, complete with its focus on the intentionality of the actor, and thereby obligate himself to get below the surface and inspect final vocabularies" (*The Last Conceptual Revolution* 71). If Rorty has to worry about people's final vocabularies, then his liberal society must restrict people's private pursuit of self-creation in order to prevent cruelty. In other words, Gander, like so many Rorty critics, sees no way that Rorty's ideal society can be for both human solidarity and the private pursuit of perfection. But as is common with critics of Rorty, Gander is (at least partially) criticizing Rorty for his style, which is narrative rather than argumentative. Rorty is giving a working definition in the context of a narrative presentation, not a conclusive and final definition which he hopes will "ground" or solidify his "argument," because this is the kind of thinking he wants to replace. By insisting on such a narrow understanding of Rorty's liberalism, Gander overlooks many of the implications of Rorty's ideas about liberalism.

Gander is correct that there are problems with using only the cruelty-based definition of liberalism, but if we read Rorty thoroughly, we can see that he really

doesn't rely as heavily on Judith Shklar as Gander thinks. For instance, Rorty also describes the proper functions of "liberal institutions and customs," which are "to diminish cruelty, make possible government by the consent of the governed, and permit as much domination-free communication as possible to take place" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 68). The free exchange of communication is particularly important because Rorty doesn't think that the government should be the only arbiter of who and what is suffering. He believes that "J.S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word. Discoveries about who is being made to suffer can be left to the workings of a free press, free universities, and enlightened public opinion" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 63). Rorty does not have to abandon Shklar, but he probably should make more explicit his reliance on a variety of social and governmental institutions to make her definition work better. He should also expand on his use of Mill, who in *On Liberty* provides an excellent picture of the tension between the liberal goals of insuring both private freedoms and the public good. Because Rorty implicitly relies upon Mill as a starting point for a lot of ideas related to civil liberties, Rorty should spend more time placing Mill's British Utilitarianism as a precursor and supporter of American Pragmatism. By doing so, he can help his audience understand better how he pictures the balance between private liberties and the public good, a crucial element in any movement towards actual political improvement.

When I speak of American liberalism, I would like to characterize it further than Rorty, although I think the ideals of liberalism certainly include government by consent, fostering conditions which allow the free exchange of ideas and the elimination of suffering as a worthy, if never-fully-attained, goal (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 68). Following loosely in the tradition of Locke, Jefferson, and Mill, I would add that a liberal vocabulary should also include discussion of issues such as the importance of guaranteed rights to a free society, ways to avoid tyranny of the majority over dissenting minorities, equality of opportunity, and, trickiest of all, balancing the needs of society with the liberties of the individual.

Through his works, William Burroughs participates in the American tradition of pragmatic, liberal thinkers, voicing his thoughts on the liberal issues I have just listed in a literary format. We ought to keep in mind that being a pragmatist does not mean that one is a pure Rortyeian thinker, subscribing to all of Richard Rorty's notions about liberal democratic values. In some ways Burroughs and Rorty see eye to eye; in other ways Burroughs fits better with Mill, and in some ways he is more radical about preserving individual liberties than either Rorty or Mill. But seeing Burroughs as part of a wider pragmatist tradition serves useful ends, enabling us to understand his works better and place them within a valuable cultural and intellectual context. Many people seem to be under the impression that Burroughs has little to say at all, thinking of him as a drugged-out nihilist or sensationalist, a reputation that has dogged him since the publication of *Naked Lunch*, a reputation probably confirmed rather than refuted by the obscenity trial brought against him for that book¹. Yet close examination of his publications, his

methods, and his own theories about writing and culture presented in interviews reveal that William Burroughs has left a powerful legacy of artistic and intellectual work that bears a distinctly liberal pragmatic bent.

William S. Burroughs works towards liberal ends in many respects, attacking cultural sources of cruelty and humiliation and exposing the evils behind a multitude of vocabularies (many of them American because he knows these best), airing their dirtiest verbal laundry in his works. He mocks them in his narrative sections, then subsumes them into his cut-up sections. He dissects their speech patterns, attacking them with their own final vocabularies. He exaggerates and magnifies their hatred in his routines, revealing plainly the naked lunch of racism, homophobia, robber-baron corporate capitalism, anti-intellectualism, authoritarianism, cultural arrogance, and malicious destructiveness that Americans are fed every day by government, society, the media, and family.

All this work to bring attention to cruelty in speech and action fits in with Rorty's praise of authors like Orwell who serve society by revealing its faults: "Novelists can do something which is socially useful: help us attend to the springs of cruelty in ourselves" (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 94). Note that Rorty praises novelists for a socially-inscribed end-product of their work, and uses the plural "ourselves," suggesting that he, like Burroughs, attempts to edify a Western, and more specifically, American, readership. Unlike Rorty, Burroughs is not above being cruel himself, inflicting humiliation upon those who act habitually in such manner towards others. As a novelist, William S. Burroughs is not constrained by any of the conventions of philosophical discourse (i.e.

maintaining a calm, polite, emotionally-detached conversation) as Rorty is, so the styles of these two writers could hardly be more different. William Burroughs is also much more interested in the vocabulary (and the act) of violence. Burroughs had a life-long fascination with violence and its tools; he dabbled in various martial arts techniques, like jujitsu and knife-fighting, and collected weapons of all kinds, especially guns. He often uses depictions of violence to represent the dangers of the struggle for freedom from control, for he believed that violence was often necessary in order to defend oneself against those who have no respect for human life or liberty: “There’s a lot of violence in my work because violence is obviously necessary in certain circumstances. I’m often talking in a revolutionary, guerilla context where violence is the only recourse . . . How can you protect people without weapons?” (Burroughs qtd. in McCaffery 35). Burroughs had a habit not only of collecting but carrying guns and other weapons on his person, a habit which resulted in the most tragic incident in his life.ⁱⁱ

For Rorty, much of the tension and difficulty of liberal politics centers on the opposition between foundationalists and liberal ironists. Rorty believes that foundationalists and ironists can coexist peacefully in the same society, as long as we all agree to use the public rhetoric of human solidarity and restrict our use of contingent final vocabularies to the private pursuit of perfection. Burroughs, on the other hand, has quite a different opinion, suggesting through his own unique terminology and themes that dissension and even violence between these two groups is practically inevitable. The ironist group he calls “Johnsons,” after a book he read as a youth that influenced him greatly, *You Can’t Win* by Jack Black. This was the story of old-time hustlers, hoboes,

and short-conⁱⁱⁱ men as told by one of their own. A Johnson is a decent human being who “just minds his own business of staying alive and thinks that what other people do is other people’s business. . . wouldn’t rush to the law if he smelled hop in the hall, doesn’t care what the fags in the back room are doing, stands by his word” (*The Adding Machine* 15). A Johnson, then, is one who puts Rorty’s ideas about the separation between public and private vocabularies into practice, and who respects other people’s right to have different values and ideas about self-perfection. Johnsons are pragmatic and ironist enough to do the business of public life with any reasonable person, for they recognize the contingency of their own vocabulary and so are willing to tolerate the differences they may have with other people. In interviews, Burroughs made explicit the connection between Johnson sentiments and liberal sentiments: “I just think liberals are, well, Johnsons—reasonable people who have some sort of sense of moderation and common sense and are not in some state of hysterical, self-righteous anger” (*From the Bunker* 246).

That Burroughs felt persecuted by non-ironists all his life is obvious by the name he bestows upon this group: “Shits.” These are all the kinds of people he detests, the ones he ridicules and heaps execrations upon, the numerous “nigger-killin’ lawmen,” fat, braying Southern Senators, and “decent, church-going women with their mean, pinched, bitter, evil faces” (*Dead City Radio*). As foundationalists of the most extreme kind, Shits possess a limited and highly polarized final vocabulary which renders them ill-equipped for citizenship in Rorty’s liberal democracy. They are not only unable to entertain doubts about this vocabulary, they are completely incapable of tolerating any other vocabulary

which differs substantially from their own: “He [the Shit leader] organized a vast Thought Police. Anybody with an absent-minded expression was immediately arrested and executed. Anyone who expressed any ideas that deviated in any way from decent church-going morality suffered the same fate. The American Moral Disease passed into its terminal stage” (*Port of Saints* 22). The American Moral Disease is the hysterical self-righteousness of Shits, The Ugly American Spirit, people who know that they are in the right, and everyone who disagrees is not just wrong, but evil and immoral. Burroughs learned why these people seem incapable of tolerance and compassion from a bit of advice given to him as a young man: “Yes, this world would be a pretty easy and pleasant place to live in if everybody could just mind his own business and let others do the same. But a wise old black faggot said to me years ago: ‘Some people are shits, darling.’ I was never able to forget it” (*The Adding Machine* 15). Burroughs thus identifies Shits with the social and political forces which have always assumed they were in the right, and who thus felt justified in persecuting and punishing anyone who was not of the same mindset. He sees the struggle between Shits and Johnsons in Manichaeian terms, in which a victory for one group is a loss for the other: “Good and evil are in a state of conflict. The outcome is uncertain. This is not an eternal conflict since one or the other will win out in this universe” (*Place of Dead Roads* 102). This struggle is not just for control but ultimately for survival, because the Shits are making atomic weapons, polluting the environment, exterminating species, and generally rendering Earth unfit for human habitation.

Although both Rorty and Burroughs want to talk about the tensions between foundationalists and ironists, they differ in their choice of descriptions. For both of them, the difference is essentially a question of language, but where Rorty uses vocabularies, Burroughs uses a virus metaphor:

We have observed that most of the trouble in the world is caused by ten to twenty percent of folks who can't seem to mind their own business because they *have* no business of their own to mind any more than a smallpox virus. Now your virus is an obligate cellular parasite, and my contention is that what we call evil is quite literally a virus parasite occupying a certain brain area which we may term the RIGHT center. The mark of a basic shit is that he has to be *right*. (*Place of Dead Roads* 155)

Around the time of the writing of *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs began developing his theories about Shits, the Word as Virus, and possession of human agents by aliens, and continued to expand and revise these ideas for the rest of his career. In order to understand his body of work as a whole, it is worthwhile that we take some time to study these ideas. As the quote above implies, Burroughs found himself wondering why Shits act the way they do, bringing misery and pain to others for the satisfaction of feeling themselves proven to be right. He began by postulating that many of these people were actually agents, acting under the orders of some other malevolent entity. His fascination with the vocabulary of the science fiction genre led him to call these controlling entities aliens. During the early sixties, his cut-up experiments in different formats led him to the idea that language, the Word, was a virus, transmitted from person to person, society to

society. This virus replicates itself as all viruses do, and leads us to think and act in certain patterns, often to our own detriment. Eventually he combined these two lines of thought, creating a scenario in which aliens controlled human agents through the Word Virus, which occupies the RIGHT center of the brain, causing the host to become intolerant and authoritative. Such hosts further alien goals by aggravating existing conflicts and creating new conflicts wherever possible. The aliens want humans to labor under oppressive and dogmatic authority because (as Mill suggests in *On Liberty*) individuality leads to creativity in thought and deed, and the aliens want humans to be as submissive and predictable as possible. To Burroughs, this is a Manichaeian conflict, and the aliens want to ultimately exterminate the human race and become masters of earth, remaking it in their own hellish image. Thus, the aliens are willing to undertake any steps which diminish human capacity for cooperative living and new avenues of expression and action. Rorty and Dewey also stress the importance of new avenues of expression, new vocabularies to replace the old, worn-out ones. Like Burroughs, they believe that individuality and creativity are important cultural resources which ought to be cultivated, rather than stifled for the sake of conformity. All three of these pragmatists see cash-value in individual liberties and the variety of citizens such liberties help to foster.

To understand his devotion to the Johnson cause, we need to picture William Burroughs as a man who loves freedom and champions the rights of the individual. Much of his writing and attention is devoted to discovering and challenging ways in which the free development of a person is hindered or arrested by the authoritative Shits.

In his works, he investigates what he calls Control, which is shorthand for any pressure brought to bear upon a person which affects the exercise of free will. William Burroughs looks at biological controls, such as drugs and sex, governmental controls, such as laws, codes, and police, and social controls, like community standards of behavior and custom. The most basic and pervasive tool of Control, however, is language:

[W]ords are still the principal instruments of control. Suggestions are words. Persuasions are words. Orders are words. No control machine so far devised can operate without words, and any control machine which attempts to do so relying entirely on external force or entirely on physical control of the mind will soon encounter the limits of control. (*The Adding Machine* 117)

In his study of Control, Burroughs has found limits, gaps, and inconsistencies, and his books are edifying presentations of this understanding. At times Control may seem monolithic and omnipresent, because we have internalized through language many of the operating principles of Control. But Burroughs takes pains to show how the struggle against Control can be fought successfully, if one has the right tools and techniques. Often the very means of controlling us also provides our liberation, such as the use of text cut-ups to break language conditioning, or the use of the drug apomorphine to break addiction to other drugs.

Drugs are one of Burroughs' earliest and most pervasive metaphors of control, and one of the issues which for him most clearly delineates the differences in thought and deed between Shits and Johnsons. I would like to put this difference in its historical

context by looking at the ways in which we have dealt, politically and socially, with drugs in America, so that we may better understand why this issue became so important to him. I believe that Burroughs is reacting against our Puritan heritage, what he calls “The American Moral Disease,” which can be traced back through the various morality campaigns, such as the Nineteenth-Century Temperance movement, or the Moral Majority of the 1980’s. The people involved in these movements are foundationalists who adhere to a rigid set of principles, usually religious ones, which tells them not only how they should act, but tells them that they must persuade or coerce (if necessary) others to act the same way. Burroughs frequently quotes former Drug Crusader Harry J. Anslinger as an example of such thinking: “Drug laws must reflect society’s disapproval of the addict” (*Place of Dead Roads* 155). Such people are not afraid to shoulder the burden of being “their brother’s keeper,” and they are more than willing to take action to protect the rest of us from ourselves.

In his study of America’s historical relationship with alcohol, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*, W.J. Rorabaugh shows us that right from the beginning of our republic, moralists and civil libertarians were already at odds:

Drinkers had claimed that to become intoxicated was their right as free men. Now, [during the Temperance crusades of the 1830’s and 40’s] that idea was challenged and freedom redefined. A man no longer had the right to seek personal indulgence, to attain selfish gratification, to act alone and apart from others. (200)

Both sides are offering competing descriptions of our rights. On the one hand, liberals claim that each individual may judge how he or she shall live, and this includes the right to make what may seem to others as foolish or self-destructive choices. Burroughs would agree with this sentiment wholeheartedly, saying a Johnson thinks what other people do is their business, and as long as they don't try to force him to act in their fashion, he would never interfere in the choices that another person makes. The moral crusaders argue that one's individual choices must be viewed in a larger social or ethical context, that these choices inevitably affect those around us. Such temperance and anti-narcotic advocates operate from a social-standards philosophy, which says that individuals do not have the right to behave in ways that violate the standards of conduct of their society. Burroughs sees this line of thinking as hypocritical and self-righteous, seeing no reason that people in a liberal democracy should have to conform to someone else's standards of behavior. Part of the problem comes from his opposition to organized religion, especially Christianity, for often these standards of behavior that are invoked by moralists come from religious principles:

Most Americans, however, did accept abstinence as a sign of grace.

During the late 1820's religious fervor peaked in a wave of revivals that swept across the country, that brought large numbers of new members into old congregations, and that led to the establishment of many new churches. This periods of rising interest in religion coincided with the first popular success of a campaign against alcohol. The two were inexorably linked. (*The Alcoholic Republic* 210)

This link between religious fervor and politicized morality continued and is with us today. In our own times, we might consider the impact of the Christian Coalition or the Southern Baptist Convention upon political parties and rhetoric. In their rhetoric, drug and alcohol use are still condemned not as unhealthy but as immoral, largely due to their pleasurable intoxicating effects which are said to ignite sinful desires for sex, violence, and other immoral behaviors. This morality rhetoric has maintained a stranglehold on public discussions of drug, tobacco, and alcohol policy, and politicians dare not refuse to support laws which punish drug users lest they be accused of promoting public immorality and be voted out of office.

The other half of anti-drug and alcohol crusades comes from those concerned about the social standards of public health and safety, although they too are ultimately arguing for some form of public morality. In his study of narcotic policies in the United States, *The American Disease*, Dr. David Musto says:

Those seeking strict narcotic controls believed that either the need for money to buy drugs or a direct physiological incitement to violence led to crime and immoral behavior. Inordinate pleasure caused by drugs, moreover, was seen to provide youth with a poor foundation for character development, and a resulting loss of independence and productivity.

(American Disease 244)

Notice the similarity between these two vocabularies. One speaks in terms of religiously-derived morality while the other speaks of public safety, but both boil down to the failure of certain individuals, in this case drug users, to live up to what some people see as

“natural” standards of conduct, given to us by tradition, God, or some other (often vague when invoked) transcendent source of authority. Both groups describe drug users like errant children, a danger to themselves and society at large, and this description of users therefore justifies the need for punishments to be brought to bear upon these offenders of decency. A minority of Americans must be scapegoated so that a larger group can see their vision of social standards (and thus their moralistic final vocabularies) vindicated.

This is the sort of American moralism which Burroughs saw brought to bear upon anyone who stood out as different from the crowd. Biographically, he claimed to have felt persecuted by moralists all his life, despite his relatively affluent WASP upbringing in St. Louis society. Much of the material on his early life in the biographies *Literary Outlaw* and *El Hombre Invisible* confirms Burroughs’ outcast state. As both a drug user and a homosexual, William Burroughs grew up and matured in a society which constantly described his private actions as deviant and disgusting, and he returned society’s disapproval with his own indignation at their reactionary judgment of him. He came to identify with the petty criminals and con men of *You Can’t Win*, people who rejected the moral codes of society and lived by their own standards.

Beyond his personal feelings of isolation and difference from the norms of his time, Burroughs sees drug and alcohol policies as deeply deceptive and destructive, a mere excuse for exercising the heavy hand of authority:

I suggest that the official opposition to drugs is a sham, that all the policies of the American Narcotics Department. . . are deliberately designed to spread the use of drugs, and the consequent unwise laws against the use of

drugs. Thus youth is deliberately led into these dead-end channels which are then made criminal by act of Congress or Parliament. This elementary chess move puts potential opposition in a concentration camp of criminality, weakened by the effects of such murderous drugs as methedrine. . . In short, drugs are an excellent method of state control; but this can never be uncovered by legalization, which they will fight all the way. (*The Job* 134)

Historically speaking, any time a society authorizes the persecution of a segment of its citizenry, we may suspect that the rhetoric of public standards so fervently advanced by reformers may only mask the worst sorts of prejudicial attitudes and injustices, which is exactly what Burroughs claims about the War on Drugs. For example, much is made of the high moral ideals of the Temperance movement. They claimed to work in the name of the family and respect for human life, and they allied themselves with the Abolitionist cause. Yet if forced to choose between Temperance and the abolition of slavery,

Early reformers considered temperance the more crucial reform. They argued that while slavery encouraged the master to idleness and vice, and the slave to ignorance and religious indifference, the effect of drink was worse: a slave had only lost control of his body, a drunkard lost mastery of his *soul*. (*Alcoholic Republic* 214)

Any moralist who claims the tavern a greater evil than the slave market is clearly not attuned to the sufferings of other human beings. Likewise, during the anti-drug

campaigns of the early and mid twentieth century, public rhetoric of moral reform masked the same old American ugliness, racism:

The most passionate support for legal prohibition of narcotics has been associated with fear of a given drug's effect on a specific minority. Certain drugs were dreaded because they seemed to undermine essential social restrictions which kept these groups under control: cocaine was supposed to enable blacks to withstand bullets which would kill normal persons and to stimulate sexual assault. Fear that smoking opium facilitated sexual contact between Chinese and White Americans was also a factor in its prohibition. Chicanos in the Southwest were believed to be incited to violence by smoking marihuana. Heroin was linked in the 1920's with a turbulent age group: adolescents in reckless and promiscuous urban gangs. Alcohol was associated with immigrants crowding into large and corrupt cities. In each instance, use of a particular drug was attributed to an identifiable and threatening minority group.

(American Disease 244-45)

We have only to look today at the disparity in penalties for crack cocaine users, the majority of whom are black, with the penalties for powder cocaine users, the majority of whom are white, to see that such racism is still operant in American drug policy and rhetoric today. Burroughs frequently makes the same connection, as in this passage from *The Soft Machine* where a despicable Southern Senator combines the rhetoric of drug hysteria and racism:

A Southern Senator sticks his fat frog face out of the outhouse and brays with inflexible authority: “And Ah advocates the extreme penalty in the worst from there is for anyone convicted of trafficking in, transporting, selling or caught using the narcotic substance known as nutmeg. . . I wanna say further that ahm a true friend of the Nigra, and understand all his simple wants. Why, I got a good Darkie in here now wiping my ass.” (116)

Burroughs has several levels of satirical play working in this scene. The Senator is both a Shit and full of Shit, as is symbolized by his placement in an outhouse. That he speaks without any real understanding of drug issues is evidenced by his fear of the “narcotic” nutmeg, which is actually a spice and has only the mildest of mind-altering effects even when taken in extreme dosages. His claim to understand the problems of minorities is equally laughable, given that he calls them “Nigras” and “Darkies,” and plainly is comfortable with such people performing the most degrading tasks imaginable. At the end of *The Ticket That Exploded*, Burroughs describes the “Control Machine” which uses “the ugliest stupidest most vulgar and degraded sounds for recording and playback” on an infinite loop, recording, playing back the sounds, and re-recording them (215). Much of the ugliness comes from drug and racial intolerance:

marijuana marijuana why that’s deadlier than cocaine
it will turn a man into a homicidal maniac he said steadily his eyes
cold as he thought of the vampires who suck riches from the vile traffic in

pot quite literally swollen with human blood he reflected grimly and his
jaw set pushers should be pushed into the electric chair
strip the bastards naked
all right let's see your arms
or in the mortal words of harry j anslinger the laws must reflect
society's disapproval of the addict
an uglier reflection than society's disapproval would be hard to
find the mean cold eyes of decent american women tight lips and no thank
you from the shop keeper snarling cops pale nigger killing eyes reflecting
society's disapproval fucking queers I say shoot them [. . .] (216)

This is the culmination of a long section of blended cut-up and narrative called “the invisible generation” in which Burroughs shows us how the verbal programming we give and receive is part of a linguistic system, and he wants us to see that Word Lines (the language in which we both speak and think) can be programmed for “calmness and good sense” or hatred and conflict (205-217). The quote above demonstrates the way Shits can spew hatred about drug users, racial minorities, and homosexuals all in the same breath. The juxtaposition of racism and drug intolerance reinforces the connection that Burroughs wants us to see between all forms of the Shit attitude of mindless hatred of contingent and (to him) harmless differences between individuals^{iv}.

In light of such a cultural context of hypocrisy and fear-mongering, William Burroughs is quite justified in seeing the War on Drugs as an all-out assault on human

liberties, instituted by governmental authorities to control us and distract us from the severe problems created by an exploitative and rapacious corporate economy:

To distract their charges from the problems of overpopulation, resource depletion, deforestation, pandemic pollution of water, land, and sky, they inaugurated a war against drugs. This provided a pretext to set up an international police apparatus designed to suppress dissidence on an international level. (*Ghost of Chance* 29)

What better way to further control of the populace than a war? This war is inflicted upon the very people that are supposed to be protected, civilians. Any other time a war is perpetrated upon civilians, it is declared an atrocity, but the invidiousness of the War on Drugs is that it is a war designed to save us from ourselves. The rhetoric of war is so suitable for oppression, because people actually expect their rights to be curtailed during wartime. Rights of forfeiture, search and seizure, and worst of all, free speech, have all been eroded by this war.

As a writer whose own works have been censored, Burroughs understands firsthand how critical free-speech rights are in the battle against Control. Because he sees the War on Drugs as representative of the worst tendencies of American politics, Burroughs has turned to it again and again as a motif of Control, especially the control of public opinion: “As William von Raab of the U.S. Customs Service said: ‘This is a war and anyone who even suggests a tolerant attitude towards drug use should be considered a traitor’” (*Ghost of Chance* 30). Burroughs is showing us how bizarre and destructive to our common liberty drug war rhetoric can be, when expressing even the mildest of pro-

drug sentiments brings down accusations of treachery. This stifling of our public discourse not only ensures that no one will dare question official policy on this issue, but implicitly works to quash all discourse which does not fit in with approved opinion.

Burroughs' fierce response to this absurd "war" follows directly in the civil liberties tradition of Mill. In *On Liberty*, Mill places the rights to freedom of thought and freedom to express those thoughts as primary rights which must be guaranteed in a free society:

This, then is the appropriate region of human liberty. It comprises, first, the inward domain of consciousness, demanding liberty of conscience in the most comprehensive sense, liberty of thought and feeling, absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical or speculative, scientific, moral, or theological. The liberty of expressing and publishing opinions may seem to fall under a different principle, since it belongs to that part of the conduct of an individual which concerns other people, but, being almost of as much importance as the liberty of thought itself and resting in great part on the same reasons, is practically inseparable from it.

(11-12)

Mill takes great pains to delineate the importance of freedom of conscience and speech, devoting parts of Chapter One and all of Chapter Two to this topic. He stresses that above all these liberties need to protect unpopular opinions, since ideas held by a majority are rarely in danger of censorship. Burroughs agrees wholeheartedly, saying quite directly "I think that all censorship, any form of censorship, should be abolished. I

don't think so-called dirty books ever inspired anyone to commit any crime more serious than masturbation" (*The Job* 70). Mills' approbation of free speech and unconventional thought, which is echoed by both Dewey and Rorty, thus leads to (at least indirect) approval of Burroughs' work, which is the voicing of unpopular opinions in an unconventional style. This approval would have been deepened by Burroughs' explicit desire to voice his opinions so that individual liberty may be extended and strengthened.

Mill goes on to tackle a more difficult and complex problem in liberal politics, describing the balance between the freedom of the individual to pursue self-perfection and the needs of society to protect the common good:

The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people. But if he refrains from molesting others in what concerns them, and merely acts according to his own inclination and judgment in things which concern himself, the same reasons which show that opinion should be free prove also that he should be allowed, without molestation, to carry his opinions into practice at his own cost. (*On Liberty* 53)

Because Burroughs uses similar reasoning to arrive at the same conclusions about human freedom, his literary work takes part in this liberal tradition of protecting and extending rights. The MOBist ("My Own Business") attitude of Burroughs' Johnsons is one of toleration. Rorty, Mill, and Burroughs all agree that we cannot have a free society if we are going to pry into the private lives of our citizens, for "if the right to mind one's own business is recognized, the whole shit position is untenable" (*Place of Dead Roads* 155).

Personal affairs cannot be legislated, because the laws which are supposed to punish “immoral” behaviors inevitably become tools of authority for oppressing those seen as somehow different from whatever normative standards might be proclaimed as “right” for a given society. In this tradition, a civilization which encourages (or even through neglect allows) people to bully one another in the name of morality is neither civil nor moral.

Much of what I have just explained for drugs about liberal freedoms could also be applied to homosexuality, Burroughs’ second most popular symbol of personal sovereignty. Immediately after writing his first novel, *Junky*, about the relationships between drugs, drug users, and society, Burroughs directed his attention towards *Queer*, his examination of his own sexuality and the social stigmas attached to his predilections. Both these topics are perennial favorites for Burroughs, giving him opportunities to point out all the differences between the Johnsons who engage in (or at least tolerate) these pleasurable pursuits and the Shits of society who vilify both the practice and the practitioners. There is the longstanding religious component to the Shit mindset, which Burroughs is eager to point out due to his loathing for organized religion in general and Christianity in particular: “And here is Reverend Braswell in the *Denver Post*: ‘Homosexuality is an abomination to God and should never be recognized as a legal human right any more than robbery or murder’” (*Place of Dead Roads* 155). Like drugs, homosexuality is often equated with such egregious social ills as murder, but this simply ignores Mill’s injunction that an individual is free to experiment and act “at his own cost,” not at the expense of others. Religious arguments like this are often combined with

the “social standards” that are supposedly violated by homosexuals, due to a variety of myths about them, such as their uncontrollable promiscuity which spreads diseases, their tendency to pederasty, and their desire to “convert” others to their lifestyle. Throughout his career as an ironist writer, Burroughs tries to dispel these myths and the power they have over him by redescribing it all. At times he shocks us by repetitive graphic images, such as that of the hanged man’s orgasm, which Allen Ginsberg (among others) suggests is a veiled reference to the involuntary orgasm of the passive recipient of homosexual intercourse. At other times he describes homoerotic utopias, such as the world of the Wild Boys, where the Shits and other homophobes of the world are the ones that fear for their lives and safety, and gay men and boys can engage in their private pleasurable pursuits without fear of censure or persecution.

Because sexual activity is such a private pursuit, it is not hard to see how the right to pursue it as one wishes fits into our liberal tradition. Like drug use, the question should not be “Why should society allow it?”, but rather, “Why should society restrict it?”. Burroughs, in his own personal, contingent, idiosyncratic way, sees drug use and homosexuality as liberating, as symbols of personal development and fulfillment. This unusual sentiment is evidence of his individuality in a liberal society, where (ideally, as least) artists, eccentrics, and other takers of the road less traveled are free to develop new and strange modes of living and expressing themselves. Mill cautions us that without such people and their unpopular ideas, society is liable to stagnation, and regardless of whether or not the majority of people can see value in what oddballs have to offer, a liberal society ought to nonetheless foster individuality, because

To give any fair play to the nature of each, it is essential that different persons should be allowed to lead different lives. In proportion as this latitude has been exercised in any age has that age been noteworthy to posterity. Even despotism does not produce its worst effects so long as individuality exists under it; and whatever crushes individuality is despotism, by whatever name it may be called and whether it professes to be enforcing the will of God or the injunctions of men. (*On Liberty* 61)

Burroughs spent a lifetime enlarging the boundaries imposed by religious morality and other traditional community standards of behavior, rejecting their dogmas in order to make room for new visions of both society and the individual. He believed that only through a combination of self-education and self-deprogramming could one get beyond the controls imposed by society and think freely for oneself. His works, as a whole, are descriptions of ways in which he has attempted to free himself from such controls, and he uses them to present readers with instructions on how to follow his example.

Burroughs felt that human beings could and must make radical changes in themselves and their world, or else we face certain destruction at the hands of our controllers. Most of his earliest work was focused on his critiques of culture and government; works such as *Junkie*, *Queer*, *Naked Lunch*, and the *Nova* trilogy focus on what is wrong with our logocentric ways of thinking, our corporate culture of greed and exploitation, and our racist, homophobic, intolerant attitudes. Gradually, as part of his critique of American society and Western culture, he presented his model of the ideal liberal ironist, the Johnson, and several different kinds of new societies in which such a

person might live.

How does one become a liberal ironist? Rorty suggests that reading widely is a crucial part of the process; we become aware of the limitations of a given vocabulary only by seeing it in relation to other vocabularies. Eventually, given a wide range of exposure to different systems of thought and expression, we come to realize that any vocabulary has holes and gaps, and no single one is any more “right” in the abstract than another; they only have more or less applicability to the problems at hand in relation to others. Like Rorty, Burroughs felt that once people discard the notion that there is such a thing as “human nature,” and begin to play with vocabularies rather than enshrining them as sacrosanct and immutable, then they will begin to see possibilities for self-transformation, rather than seeing only rules and limitations. He used the slogan, “if nothing is true, then everything is permitted. That is, if we realize that everything is an illusion, then any illusion is permitted. As soon as we say that something is true, real, then immediately things are not permitted” (*The Job* 97). He says that if we can attain an ironist’s detachment about final vocabularies, then any final vocabulary can be considered without being invested as an authority. As long as we hold the metaphysician’s attachment to only one perspective, then our investments in that perspective will lead us to believe there is a “Truth,” which for him is the source of the Shit attitude: the adamant adherence to some particular, idiosyncratic vocabulary as “Truth,” regardless of contradictory evidence or the disastrous outcomes which will result from acting on this “Truth.” In Burroughs’ mind, such belief-systems are rationalizations, for “Truth has nothing to do with facts. Those who manipulate Truth to

their advantage, the people of the Big Lie, are careful to shun facts. In fact nothing is more deeply offensive to such people than the concept of fact. To adduce fact in your defense is to rule yourself out of court” (*Ghost of Chance* 7). As a pragmatic thinker, Burroughs is always interested in the evidence, the “facts” of a given situation, such as medical evidence about the effects of drugs as opposed to all the drug-hysteria myths about drug-taking. Burroughs wants to obtain data, weigh and consider it, then arrive at a conclusion. Shits, in his opinion, already have a specific answer in mind to most questions, such as those of drug policy, and facts can only hinder them from obtaining the outcomes they desire. Facts actually offend such manipulators because using facts depends upon having a non-authoritarian perspective which is utterly alien to the Shit mindset. Such people either are an authority or work as an agent of it, slavishly following the dictates of convention, such as the church or government. To bring up facts is to question the veracity of the authority on which they depend as an infallible source of “Truth.” Shits cannot appreciate irony, for they abhor the very concept of competing viewpoints and work ruthlessly to eliminate all such competition from consideration.

In order to free us from this kind of thinking, much of Burroughs’ work from the mid-60’s on concerns the edification of the reader in ways of becoming a Johnson, and like Rorty’s method, the transformation occurs through guided experience. In addition to his own works, a Burroughs-style reading list would include Count Korzybski, Wilhelm Reich, Jack Black’s *You Can’t Win*, L. Ron Hubbard, Jean Genet, and Denton Welch^v. But Burroughs is a novelist interested in going beyond the confines of normal reading

experiences, so his process of edification would not stop at a reading list. In *The Job*, he first proposes his “Academy 23,” which is really a training program for Johnsons. The goal is to help people restructure their entire thought process. This new way of thinking “is the thinking you would do if you didn’t have to think about any of the things you ordinarily think about if you had no work to do nothing to be afraid of no plans to make” (*The Job* 91). As we have already seen in the previous chapter on cut-ups and other Burroughs techniques, Burroughs always has a specific outcome in mind, which is to lead us out of our typical, everyday patterns of thought, thus allowing for new, more adaptive, more constructive patterns to take hold. To make such radical changes in one’s thinking, one cannot rely on the printed word, or on any sort of word-based experience alone, since Burroughs sees language as the root of the problem. He proposes a wide range of edifying experiences:

The students would receive a basic course of training in the non-chemical discipline of Yoga, karate, prolonged sense withdrawal, stroboscopic lights, the constant use of tape recorders to break down verbal association lines. . . after basic training the student would be prepared for drug trips to reach areas difficult to explore by other means in the present state of our knowledge. (*The Job* 137-38)

As a pragmatic thinker, Burroughs sees value in obtaining as wide a range of experiences as possible, leading us out of stale metaphors and worn-out paths of thought into a more mature and adaptable frame of mind. The purpose is “decontrol of opinion,” meaning a state in which all our verbal and cultural conditioning does not control us, for we have

become aware of those patterns and we have mentally grown beyond their narrow confines (*The Job* 138).

In *Cities of the Red Night*, he sketches a picture of an Academy 23 student, Yen Lee, a man of great insight and discerning judgment:

Unlike his counterparts in western countries, he had been carefully selected for a high level of intuitive adjustment, and trained accordingly to imagine and explore seemingly fantastic potentials in any situation, while at the same time giving equal consideration to prosaic and practical aspects. He had developed an attitude at once probing and impersonal, remote and alert. He did not know when the training had begun, since in Academy 23 it was carried out in a context of reality. (13)

In other words, Yen Lee has learned to use his imaginative powers to develop creative ideas and solutions to problems, while also developing a habit of considering the cash-value of those imaginings and using practical talents to put them into practice. Through the example of such characters, Burroughs encourages his readers to liberate their minds of the effects of Control so that they may become tolerant, adaptable Johnsons. But because Shits and Johnsons have antithetical aims, Burroughs goes on to suggest new societies in which Johnsons would not have to suffer under the cruel and intolerant rule of Shits.

The first such picture of a new society is his homoerotic utopia, the world of the Wild Boys. This is not a place but rather a mobile community, composed entirely of young boys and men. In his desire to rub out what he sees as the three centers of control,

the nation, the family, and reproduction, Burroughs postulates societies of boys which transcend national boundaries and do not need females to produce offspring. Although the appeal of such a society is obviously limited, Burroughs presents a picture of an alternative community completely free from conventional governmental structures, family structures, or other overt systems of control.

Around the same time as the *Wild Boys*, Burroughs began developing his ideas about voluntary communities that included both men and women, based on his values of personal liberty and the M.O.B. (My Own Business) principle. This idea, developed in several essays and novels, parallels Mill's statements about private pursuits: society need regulate them only when they directly and negatively affect other people. A M.O.B.ist is one who recognizes the sovereignty of the individual and goes about his own business quietly without desiring that others should act as he does, since "what other people do is other people's business" (*Adding Machine* 15). Adherence to the M.O.B. principle makes Johnsons excellent citizens for Rorty's ideal liberal democracy, because they are liberal enough to see that protecting their own rights and interests necessarily involves recognizing the corresponding rights and interests of other citizens as well. They are ironist enough to see that their own final vocabulary and private dreams of self-perfection are contingent and idiosyncratic, so they can tolerate other people who have different final vocabularies and ideas of self-perfection. The only kind of self-fulfillment that is alien to the Johnson attitude is that which depends upon coercing others. Eschewing coercion certainly fits well with Rorty's ideas about avoiding cruelty. Furthermore, they are liberally compassionate in the Rortyeian sense, for "A Johnson minds his own

business. But he will help when help is needed. He doesn't stand by while someone is drowning or trapped in a wrecked car" (*Adding Machine* 74). Johnsons recognize the cash-value of human solidarity.

While working off of the My Own Business principle, such communities would still have to be placed within existing national boundaries, and so still be subject to some restrictions, but Burroughs believed they could be structured so as to ameliorate many of the worst features of governmental and social control, and in time such communities might grow beyond the nation-state. He believed this could be done

by the withdrawal of like-minded individuals into separate communities within nations. The Black Muslims are moving in that direction. So are the Hippies. Other preferential units could be set up: all male communities, ESP communities, health communities, karate and judo communities, glider balloonist communities, yoga communities, Reichian communities, silence and sense-withdrawal communities. Such communities would soon become international and break down national borders. (*The Job* 98-99)

Burroughs goes on to present such societies in his second trilogy and in *Ghost of Chance*. Using historical information, Burroughs pictures the free pirate societies of the Eighteenth Century as forerunners of his envisioned communes: "The liberal principles embodied in the French and American revolutions and later in the liberal revolutions of 1848 had already been codified and put into practice by pirate communes a hundred years earlier" (*Cities of the Red Night* xi). These liberal principles include democratic rule and

guaranteed rights and liberties for the citizens secured in a document Burroughs calls the Articles. Later, in *Ghost of Chance*, Burroughs enumerates specifically some of these rights: “there would be no capital punishment, no slavery, no imprisonment for debt, and no interference with religion or sexuality” (57). By guaranteeing freedom of conscience and individual liberty, Burroughs places his ideal society firmly in the tradition of Jefferson and Mill. It also blends with Rorty’s ideas about a liberal society as dedicated to the reduction of human suffering, because Burroughs envisions such societies as a haven of liberty for those under the yoke of control, especially colonial control, open to “all those who are enslaved and oppressed throughout the world, from the sugar plantations of the West Indies, the whole Indian population of the American Continent peonized and degraded by the Spanish into sub-human poverty and ignorance” (*Cities of the Red Night* xiii). He goes on to describe his free societies as outlets for those suffering from the ill effects of the industrial revolution as well, absorbing all those who flee urban slums seeking relief from economic exploitation. Burroughs depicts all such sufferers banding together in human solidarity, struggling for freedom from the oppressive regimes of the Shits.

Just as the Shits have their goal, which is Control, Johnsons also have a goal, freedom. For Burroughs, the greatest symbol of freedom from Control is space travel, so his ideal Johnson communities are dedicated to the realization of a working space program: “to achieve complete freedom from past conditioning is to be in space” (*The Adding Machine* 138). This is not a predestined goal, because the outcome of the struggle between Johnsons and Shits is still in doubt. Burroughs believes that we have

the potential for space travel, but we have to take concrete, difficult, dangerous steps in order to realize this possibility. Additionally, Burroughs views space travel not just as an end in itself, but pragmatically as a concrete goal which could give human beings a greater sense of solidarity if they could unite and work together. He sees Earth a “death camp,” subject at any moment to nuclear or biological warfare, environmental disasters, and plagues, any of which could wipe out humanity. Burroughs uses images of violent struggle between Shits and Johnsons in order to stress how high the stakes are in this game: “The Johnsons kill to rid the spaceship Earth of malefactors who are sabotaging our space program. It’s like you see somebody knocking holes in the bottom of the lifeboat and shitting in the water supply” (*The Place of Dead Roads* 167).

Planned apocalypse, or “Nova” as Burroughs called it, is the ending that has been “pre-recorded” on the Reality Film by Control. During his period of experimentation with tape recorders, film, and other cut-up media, Burroughs began to use the metaphors of those media in his writing. He postulated that by means of media control and the Word Virus, the agents of control were “pre-recording” the outcomes of important events, including the end of the world, onto a film track he called the “Reality Film.” This Reality Film is repetitive and dull, for it embodies the Shit values of mindless conformity and submission to authority. As was discussed in Chapter Two, cut-ups are a primary means of disrupting the pre-recorded outcomes, but for each successful disruption there may be many failures. The best way to break out of the Reality Film of Control is to push humanity into space, where we have the potential for limitless experimentation in different modes of living, due to unlimited horizons: “the future of

any artifact lies in the direction of increased flexibility, capacity for change, and ultimately, mutation” (*The Adding Machine* 136).

Burroughs symbolically connects space, silence, and creativity in a way which suggests that the Johnsons’ goal of space travel represents greater personal, artistic, and political freedom for human beings, while the Shits’ goal of total Control represents stagnation, repression, and extinction. Human beings will have to undergo radical change in order to move into space, which is exactly what the Shits don’t want, since they always strive to maintain the oppressive status quo. Only Johnsons will be willing to take the steps necessary: “to travel in space, you must leave the old verbal garbage behind: God talk, country talk, mother talk, love talk, party talk. You must learn to exist with no religion, no country, no allies. You must learn to live alone in silence” (*The Adding Machine* 138). The Word Virus is the principal Shit tool of control, so only those who have divested themselves of it can achieve freedom. When the conditioning created and reinforced by the Word, by society, and by religion is removed and overcome, then one is in space in silence, a condition of adaptability and increased capacity for change. Burroughs uses metaphors of biology, calling this step into space an evolutionary step for human beings, away from the Slave Gods, for “in the beginning was the word and the word *was* God. And what does that make us? Ventriloquist’s dummies. Time to leave the Word-God behind” (*The Adding Machine* 105). Burroughs also connects this new state with creativity, linking artists and imaginative vision with the more free conditions of space: “Artists and creative thinkers will lead the way into space because they are

already writing, painting, and filming space. They are providing us with the only maps for space travel” (*The Adding Machine* 104).

This meshes thematically with Rorty’s vision of his ideal society, one in which human beings work together in solidarity, enjoy a wider range of freedoms, and have almost unlimited vistas for imaginative exploration and narratives of self-creation. Burroughs explicitly describes space as a place where there are no longer pre-recorded outcomes, no more Controllers: “we are not setting out to explore static pre-existing data. We are setting out to create new worlds, new beings, new modes of consciousness” (*The Adding Machine* 104). Space is his symbol of the ideal free, liberal, creative society.

The picture I have been painting of Burroughs shows, I hope, his pragmatic visions of American society and the kinds of people he sees in it. Like Rorty, Burroughs is concerned about the balance between conformity and solidarity, between liberty and authority, and he wants to show that both solidarity and individual liberty are values that we should strive to enlarge and encourage. Neither author wants to sacrifice one value for the other. Both of them are working out of a liberal tradition that goes back to the eighteenth century, yet trying to bring the values of this tradition into our own times, applying them to current conditions.

ⁱ Burroughs originally published *Naked Lunch* with Maurice Girodias' Olympia Press, because no other publishing house would touch it. Once this European edition began to sell, Grove Press of New York agreed to publish an American edition, although the excerpts of *Naked Lunch* which had been issued by the small, Chicago-based literary journal *Big Table* had already run into seizure problems. To no one's surprise, the post office in Boston confiscated the Grove edition of *Naked Lunch*, leading to a highly publicized trial in which major figures in literature, such as Norman Mailer and Allen Ginsberg, were called upon to explain why *Naked Lunch* passed the Supreme Court's litmus test of "redeeming social value." The defense succeeded, and as Jennie Skerl put it, "*Naked Lunch* was the last literary work to be subjected to a major censorship trial in the United States and marked the end of an era that began in the 1870's when the crusader Anthony Comstock persuaded federal and state governments to create and enforce stricter obscenity laws" (36). Those wishing to study this important case in more detail should consult Michael Barry Goodman's book, *Contemporary Literary Censorship: The Case History of Burroughs' Naked Lunch*.

ⁱⁱ Burroughs was living in Mexico City with his wife, Joan, and their two children. They frequently ran short of money, and Burroughs pawned or sold personal items to make ends meet. On September sixth, 1951, William and Joan went to a friend's apartment to sell one of his handguns. They were drinking heavily, and in a drunken haze Burroughs suddenly decided it was time for a "William Tell routine." Although this was not something they had done before, Joan joined in the sport by immediately putting her cocktail glass on her head. William sighted carefully and was usually an excellent marksman, but an inaccurate gun and drunken reflexes resulted in a fatal shot to Joan's temple. Although shocked and grieved by the act, Burroughs did not turn away from firearms after this incident. He later claimed that were it not for Joan's death, he would probably not have become the writer that he did. He was also led to postulate his theory of alien possession by the "Ugly Spirit," which he blamed for controlling him and causing Joan's death.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Short-con" means the small-time hustlers who exploit marks (victims) with petty tricks for relatively small amounts of money or goods. The short-con is an art in itself, requiring quick hands and a sharp wit, but it entails less risk than the "long" con, which often requires heavy investments of time, money, and effort. The short con can usually be done alone or with a single partner, whereas the long con often requires a team effort.

^{iv} In the *Soft Machine*, Burroughs gives another passage in which a primary controller, the "District Supervisor," tries to appeal to racist sentiments as a way of promoting divisions amongst people: "Now kid what are you doing over there with the niggers and the apes? Why don't you straighten out and act like a white man?—After all they're only human cattle—You know that yourself—Hate to see a bright young man fuck up and get off on the wrong track—" (149) See also *Nova Express* page 177 for another example of Shits using race-baiting as a control technique.

^v Count Alfred Korzybski founded the theory of General Semantics, from which Burroughs took his ideas about the contingency of language. Burroughs also saw Korzybski as a persecuted thinker, excluded and hounded by the Shits because his ideas were threatening to expose their Word Virus control system. Wilhelm Reich was a proponent of an alternative theory of medicine, based on his "orgones," minute life particles which were generated by living creatures. All diseases were supposedly caused by a lack of or degeneration of the body's orgones. L. Ron Hubbard was a science fiction author and one of the founders of Scientology. Although Burroughs borrowed some concepts from Scientology, he later became disenchanted with the organization because of its cult-like, controlling atmosphere. Jean Genet was a French writer whom Burroughs both read and knew personally. Burroughs admired him as a writer of talent and a fellow outcast from respectable society. Denton Welch was an obscure English writer who died at a young age. Burroughs liked his prose style and his open homosexuality.

CONCLUSION

WHAT SHOULD WE TAKE AWAY FROM ALL THIS?

In this work I have presented a pragmatic view of the works of William Burroughs using ideas from Richard Rorty and John Dewey, but like all viewpoints, this privileges some issues while ignoring others. What about Rorty's elitism, or Burroughs' misogyny? Although I would like to deal with every important issue for both authors, to maintain focus it was necessary for me to pick those issues that most clearly show the relationship between William Burroughs and the tradition of American pragmatic thought: pragmatic techniques and liberal themes. Dewey tells us there is room for both synthesis, or breaking things up into parts and looking at details, and analysis, which is looking at the bigger picture. This conclusion is a good place for drawing some more general connections and recognizing those areas which still remain relatively unexplored.

Richard Rorty has done a lot to revive pragmatism and bring it back into critical discussion in his own field of philosophy. This is good news for us in American studies, since pragmatism is our only native philosophical tradition. He has also prompted discussion on the relationship between the humanities and culture by suggesting that literature has been and remains a more effective way of promoting ideas and influencing social structures than philosophy. This assertion deals not only with content but also with style, suggesting that a narrative format is more apprehensible than an argumentative one. Because I agree with his idea, I have followed him by writing this paper in more of a literary style than a philosophical one. Although it is certainly worthwhile for us literary/cultural studies critics to understand philosophy, that does not mean that we have

to try to write like Wittgenstein or Derrida. In fact, if we really want to be able to perform the work of critics, which Dewey says is to promote the public's understanding of works of art, then it is counterproductive for us to use inflated, arcane prose when simpler, more direct wording would do. If a philosopher like Rorty can write in a more casual, descriptive style, why can't we literary critics? If the public cannot understand what we academics are writing, then they will continue to think that what we do has little to no meaning for their lives. And they are probably right to think so.

The problem of the marginalization of the humanities and their increasing irrelevancy to American life is examined in detail in John J. Stuhr's *Genealogical Pragmatism: Philosophy, Experience, and Community*. Stuhr convincingly describes the corporatization of higher education as a trend which has been either ignored or abetted by the humanities, leaving us academicians three options: continue to wane and diminish in our ivory tower, embrace "edu-business" by turning the humanities into a service industry, or become entertainers by shifting our analyses into marketable pop-culture phenomenon. Stuhr rejects all three options, but he warns that as things now stand, we may be forced to choose from among these three unappealing options:

Let me be very clear here. No better option now is available to humanists *as* humanists—in their present professional roles or current activities as humanists. Better options are available to any persons—including professional humanists—who are willing and able to engage the public—citizens, legislators, journalists, foundation heads, the business community, politicians, and others who do not determine teaching

schedules, fix course prerequisites, approve research leaves, grant tenure, or award merit pay. (20)

Pragmatism, with its focus on tying specific ideas to specific outcomes, offers new ways of looking at current practices, including our writing styles. In this dissertation, I have tried to write in a manner that is both professional and (I hope) accessible to those who do not have advanced degrees but do have an interest in literature and philosophy. But Stuhr is correct in saying that there are no easy, obvious answers available right now. The tension between how we academics see ourselves and public perception of us is one that we had better resolve. We in the humanities remain passive during this time of change at our own peril.

Rorty also has some unresolved tensions in his work, especially the public/private split which comes out of the foundationalist/ironist division. First of all, it isn't clear yet just how the public/private split is supposed to work. Most people engaged in public discourse do so out of privately held positions, meaning they arise out of people's idiosyncratic Final Vocabulary. Rorty needs to explain more clearly how public issues are supposed to be discussed without dipping into private values. Perhaps he means our discussions of laws and policies should work using a vocabulary of democratic and liberal values and rights, and a pragmatic discourse would also include examination of the specific context of the issues in question at the moment. For example, a public discussion of gay marriage could sidestep the whole religious controversy by avoiding the term "marriage," which brings up Final Vocabulary values for many people, and using the term "civil union" or other such appellation. Such a discussion would avoid

debating what is “natural” for humans in terms of sexual orientation or what God commands people with respect to companionship, and instead would rely on what rights for the pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment are at stake. The discussion would also try to avoid generalized arguments over principles by putting out specific suggestions regarding the laws which would govern civil unions, and examining specific policies which would be affected, such as rights of inheritance and tax codes. More questions on the public/private split remain, but the idea is useful if it can help us turn away from endless argument and move us towards action in the public sector.

The potential elitism of being an ironist concerns me, although Rorty often implies that intellectuals are the only ones who need to be ironists. If we are going to try as a culture to move beyond foundationalism, we will undoubtedly run into the problem of people who don’t want to leave it behind. For Burroughs, things are quite simple: Shits are the source of most of society’s problems, and they ought to be removed from power and even killed when necessary. Burroughs tells us quite directly that foundationalists (at least the most extreme kind, those I called zealots) cannot and will not allow ironists to pursue their dreams of freedom and self-creation, so those ironist Johnsons have to either remove themselves and create new societies, or violently overthrow the Shits and their repressive institutions. Rorty, as a liberal pragmatist who wants improvement in society rather than revolution, clearly cannot advocate this route. I cannot either, although sometimes I understand Burroughs’ frustration with people who want society or government to play the father figure and protect citizens from themselves. This is the fundamental tension that both authors wrestle with but cannot resolve: how

shall we have a society which can reconcile the conservative values of foundationalists with the free-form experimentalism of ironists? There is a line we must draw between foundationalists' desire to live according to their principles and ironists' desire to experiment with new ideas and practices freely. We must recognize people's right to advocate the values they hold without allowing them to coerce others, or allowing them to legislate the government into coercing for them.

Burroughs goes a bit too far when he tries to paint all authority figures as evil and all foundationalists as cruel. Not all Christians are meddlesome or interested in persecuting homosexuals, and by demonizing Shits so vehemently he seems in danger of being just as much of an extremist as he makes *them* out to be. Burroughs is of value not because we should take his advice literally, but because the dreams and values of the individual are advocated too little in public discourse; the emphasis is most often on the need for structure, order, and "traditional values," whatever those may be. Burroughs is not just a parodist, for he does offer some positive, constructive visions of individuals and societies, namely the Johnson family. His idea here is simple but appealing: mind your own business and let others do the same, involving yourself only when others need and ask for your help. Burroughs is worth paying attention to because he is a champion of individual liberty, and in a world where technology offers society and government more and more ways for monitoring, categorizing, and influencing private behavior, we pursuers of private dreams need all the defenders we can get.

Because of technology and increasing centralization of both government and corporate structures, Burroughs' theories about control of the mind through word and

image addiction are of interest to everyone. Even if you are a foundationalist, you may not like the Word Lines that are being laid down, and Burroughs offers both an understanding of the control system and how to free oneself from it. If combined with current media analyses and linguistics, Burroughs' ideas about language and image could be even more valuable.

Finally, Burroughs' push for humanity's move into space has value both on the literal and the symbolic level. Symbolically, space represents silence and freedom from conditioning. Learning to create silence within one's own mind by shutting down the Word (at least temporarily) is recognized as a valuable practice in almost every spiritual tradition: meditation in Buddhism, rosary chanting in Catholicism, fasting and vision questing in Native American paths, etc. Similar techniques are taught scientifically in biofeedback programs. Creating some silence within ourselves and tapping into our internal resources for greater peace of mind and creativity could not only benefit us individually, but could help create that Johnson family of self-sufficient individuals who help each other out when needed.

As a pragmatic thinker, Burroughs reminds us that outcomes are tied to practices: "Happiness is a by-product of function." Here at the end of the cold war, without a great Communist enemy to defeat, the space program seems antiquated. But if it were to be promoted as a world-wide venture, drawing resources and talents from countries all over the globe, an ambitious space program could be an invaluable tool for promoting human solidarity by fixing our sights on this common goal. This unity of purpose could help draw nations into better dialogues and help them become more accustomed to working

together instead of arguing and competing, as so often seems to be the case now.

Diverting some of our massive military budgets into a constructive, cooperative space program could create historical opportunities. Let us do everything we can to create a world in which Nova is no longer a daily possibility.

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Burroughs' work in literature, society, and politics, and by showing the value and importance of Pragmatism to the study of American literature and culture.